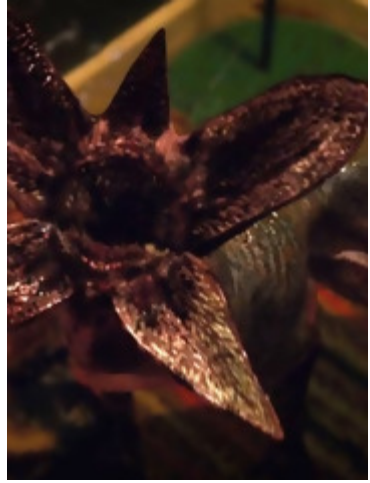

A Boy and His Demogorgon by Bruce Campbell

Category: Stranger Things, 2016
Genre: Adventure, Drama
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2019-05-08 15:21:29
Updated: 2019-06-20 00:47:52
Packaged: 2019-12-12 18:35:06
Rating: T
Chapters: 15
Words: 33,228
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Demodogs are about to invade Hawkins. Max wants to be friends with both Lucas and Dustin. Who is this bad**s named Billy? Will Hawkins ever be the same again? Takes place during Season 2 beginning on Halloween Night.

1. Chapter 1

A Boy and his Demogorgon (or Dustonius Pollywogus)

Author's note: This is my second Stranger Things fan fic. It takes place during Season 2. This opening scene actually takes place on Halloween night as Dustin is coming home in his Ghost Buster costume and finds Dart in the trash. The story will include all of our Season 2 characters, but will focus most heavily on two groups of characters: the kids Dustin, Lucas, and Max, and then the teens: Nancy, Jonathan, Steve, and Billy. I had the idea for this story while I was thinking about Max and Billy. If you read my last fan fic, you know that I wasn't able to include Max and Billy in that story, because I started it before Season 2. So I was very excited to see them in Season 2, and I thought they added so much to the show, but I also thought that there simply wasn't enough time during the 9 episodes of Season 2 to really, really focus on Billy and Max. So I thought of this story, because I wanted to expand on them as individuals, and expand on the waves that they cause within our two groups (the kids and the teens). So I have a whole bunch of awesome and fun stuff planned for Max with Dustin/Lucas, and I have a whole bunch of awesome and fun stuff for Billy. Also, while I was watching Season 2, I felt like the whole Demodog story had a little bit in common with the movie Gremlins. I love that movie, and I really wanted to expand in that direction, so I also have a whole bunch of awesome and fun Gremlins sort of stuff planned for the Demodogs as they run wild in Hawkins.

With all that said, this story starts on Halloween night in Season 2. Dustin finds Dart, just like normal, but then things start to slowly diverge from there. Over the next few chapters, the divergence will get bigger and bigger, so you may read some familiar scenes that are similar to Season 2, but then the story will start to take a major left turn. In the end, the Demodogs will invade Hawkins, and all of our favorite characters will do their best to save the day. Along the way, they will love each other, hate each other, and love each other some more. I hope I can do it justice. And I hope I can get a good chunk of it done before

Season 3 comes along and changes everything. :) I already have a little headstart on this story. Thanks so much for reading.

Dustin Henderson strolled up to his house after the best night of the year. Halloween by itself had always been the best night of the year. Their party had voted on it once, a fear years ago. Aside from general Halloween good spirits, though, Dustin was in an extra good mood.

"Tubular," he said to himself. He felt just a bit lighter than normal, as if gravity itself wasn't quite strong enough to contend with someone as great as The Dustin Henderson.

"Tubulaar," he said again, trying to draw out the last syllable like he imagined cool people did when they talked. Though his family had moved around a lot when he was younger, he'd never been to California. Still, he imagined that they spoke in a cool, sub-dialect of American English. He tried to say it the way he thought Max's old friends from before she'd moved to Hawkins might say it. "Tubulaaaar"

The sound of rattling metal caught his attention.

Dustin was pulled out of his happy daydreams. He turned to look at his beaten up old trash can. It gave a little shake as something moved inside.

"Mews?" Dustin called. Could the cat have jumped inside the trash can and gotten stuck? Mewsie didn't usually go digging in their trash. Dustin's mom fed her far too well for that. It didn't sound like Mews, either. As he continued to stare at the trash can, his curiosity piqued, he heard a muffled sound: a strange gurgling chip that didn't sound like any cat he'd ever heard. "Mews, is that you?" he called a little louder.

Dustin jumped as the trash can shook. The metal rattled as something banged around inside of it. His heart began to pound, and his bag of candy dropped from his suddenly lifeless fingers.

His curiosity wrestled with his fear as he stared at the vibrating trash can. Whatever was inside, it wasn't the family cat. Was it dangerous? His curiosity won the fight, and Dustin took a tentative step forward.

His hands came back to life, and he was able to reach over his shoulder to grab his proton blaster. His palms began to sweat as he leveled the barrel of the gun at the trash can. The thing continued to rattle as Dustin drew closer.

"Shit, shit, shit, sh..." He had no idea what might be waiting for him inside the trash can. It could have been a raccoon with rabies. It could have been just a stray cat. It could have been a face-hugger alien. It could have been a small sized demon from an evil dimension, for all he knew. After all, it was Halloween, a night when the barriers between realms were especially thin.

He was close enough to touch the trash can with the tip of his weapon, now. Only the frail, aluminum lid stood between him and whatever thing lay inside. If it came bursting out, reaching for his face, he probably wouldn't be able to get away in time. That weird sound grew louder. No animal Dustin had ever heard made a sound like that.

His heart pounded in his chest as he reached for the lid of trash can. This could be the last mistake he ever made, but he needed to know what was inside.

He took one last, deep breath, and shouted a battle cry as he threw off the lid, ready to face the monster.

Dustin's eyes fell on the thing for the first time. His brain struggle between his vivid imagination and the reality that was sitting in the middle of his trash.

"Hoooly Shit..."

The animal struggled a little as a hand wrapped around it. The hand was warm, a little too warm for the animal's liking, because he liked it cold. The hand belonged to a being that was much, much larger than he was. Though the animal had no eyes, he could see heat, and electro-magnatism, and other forms of energy. This great big being was producing a lot of heat and energy. His small, animal brain told him that the being would be an excellent source of the calories and nutrients he needed to grow, but that he was far to big to try to

consume.

He needed to eat, though. His instincts told him that he supposed to shed his skin soon. He would need to eat a lot for that to happen. He was usually hungry. His animal instincts drove him to consume so that he could grow, so that he could consume some more, so that he could grow some more. He had already shed his skin once. That was when he had grown a tail. His instincts told him that he would have legs soon, but to get there, he needed to eat.

The animal felt himself tipped upside down, and he fell through the air for a second before landing on his back. It hadn't been painful. He was fairly flexible, and the sandy surface he'd been dropped onto was also soft. Though he wasn't hurt, he suddenly found himself very uncomfortable. There was some sort of bright, burning heat source up above him. His flesh tingled as he felt the oppressive heat beat down on him. It was almost as bad as the sun, which was a thing he usually avoided. He noticed a small cave nearby, and he used his little forelimbs to drag himself into it. He breathed a little easier then, enjoying the cool damp of the cave that protected him from that bright heat source.

Suddenly, his nostrils caught the scent of something else he could eat. Pieces of something fell onto the ground only a short distance from him. He wasn't familiar with the stuff, but his nose told him that it was high in calories, and his instinctive hunger drove him toward it. He recoiled, though, as he poked his snout back outside of the cave. That oppressive source of heat was still out there.

There was a loud, booming sound that echoed through his timpanic membranes like thunder. "Too hot? Sorry about that, little guy." The animal didn't know what those sounds meant, but he was relieved that, suddenly, the heat source had vanished. With nothing keeping him from the attractive pieces of food, he crawled forward and began to devour them. Again, they weren't something he'd encountered before, but his taste buds confirmed what his nose had already told him: it would give him the energy he needed to grow, and he needed to grow very soon.

"D'artagnan," that loud sound boomed again. "I'm gonna call you D'artagnan." Unaware of what those sounds meant, the animal

continued to munch away at his food. That giant being was standing nearby. The heat and energy he gave off was visible from a long distance away, but he didn't seem to be any kind of threat to the animal. Clearly he wasn't a carnivorous predator, or he would already have eaten the animal. Feeling safe, and ever hungry, the animal continued to munch away.

2. Chapter 2

"I still don't get why they call him Zombie Boy," Max told Lucas as they walked together to their first class of the morning. "I mean, I get it, he got lost in the woods for a week or something, but why is he a zombie? Because everyone thought he was dead?"

"Yeah, I mean, we had a funeral for him and everything," Lucas said.

"After a week?" Max said skeptically.

"Well, see, some other kid drowned at the quarry... we thought it was Will because his body was super decomposed," Lucas said.

"What?" Max said. "Ok, that's not funny."

"It's not a joke, alright," Lucas said sadly. "It's public knowledge. You can ask anybody, except Will because he is REALLY sensitive about it. Alright?"

Max studied his face for a long time, honestly unsure how to take his story. It didn't sound like something a person would make up, but then again, it didn't sound real, either. As far as she'd seen, shy little Will was the nicest kid she'd ever met. Since he was small and shy, it was natural that he'd be bullied, but the whole zombie part didn't make sense to her. She really felt like she was missing something. It almost seemed like everyone around her knew something that she didn't.

Maybe that was just what it felt like to move to a new town and begin at a new school. Everyone DID know a lot of things she didn't. They knew which teachers would punish you for turning in your homework late, and which ones wouldn't. They knew just what to say to Lunch Lady Phyllis to get her to hand out that precious chocolate pudding that she hoarded in the back. They knew better than to talk to scary Janitor Glenn who suffered from Vietnam flashbacks. And, clearly, they all knew that Will had been missing and presumed dead for a week last year. Now she knew that story, if it was true.

After deciding that she couldn't detect any dishonesty on Lucas' face,

she felt it was safe to take him at his word.

"Ok," she said, and headed into her first class, with Lucas close behind her. She still felt like she was missing something.

"Harrington, right?" Billy asked. "I heard you used to run this school. That true? King Steve, they used to call you. Then you turned bitch."

Steve didn't rise to the bait. He didn't know Billy, and Billy didn't know him. They had no history, and no reason to like or dislike each other, so Steve assumed the other was just trying to distract him so he'd take his mind off the basketball. There had been a time where Steve would have risen to the challenge, where protecting his reputation was worth getting in a fight over some little insult. Of course, there had also been a time when he didn't need to fight, because of that very reputation. No one would have dared to talk to him that way.

At one time, his image at his reputation had been everything. This past year, he'd forgotten about almost all of that. This past year, he'd had something more important on his mind. This past year, he'd had Nancy.

He tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. Thinking about Nancy, and that party last night, was too much for him, so he tried to keep his mind on basketball.

"Maybe you should just shut up and play the game," Steve said.

Billy put a hand on his chest and pushed him to the hardwood floor, snatching the ball away. Steve grimaced as he fell hard on one shoulder, and then scrambled back to his feet. He tried to spring into motion to catch up to Billy, but he was way too late. Billy jumped, obnoxiously passed the ball under one leg, and scored easily. There was a time where Steve would been angry. There was a time where Steve would have gotten in a fight over something that small. Steve didn't feel angry now.

He only felt defeated.

"Steve!"

He turned to see Nancy standing at the door to the gym. Steve's stomach lurched again. He'd been avoiding her all day, dreading the conversation that he was afraid to have with her. She looked upset. Her face was easy to read. He tried to keep any expression at all from his face, because he wasn't sure if he was more upset or more hurt.

Author's Note: This is where the story begins to diverge. You'll notice a few lines are different from the show, and then everything changes.

"His name is D'artagnan," Dustin said proudly, as he opened the box and revealed his new pet to his friends for the first time. The five of them huddled around the table in the AV room and stared down at the little animal with no eyes, two legs, and a tail. "Cute, right?" Dustin said, picking up him and holding him out so his friends could get a closer look.

"D'artagnan?" Mike asked.

"Dart for short," Dustin told him.

"And he was in your trash?" Max asked.

"Foraging for food," Dustin said. His eyes suddenly lit up. "Do you want to hold him?" he asked his friends. Most of them immediately recoiled from the suggestion, but Dustin was sure they'd grow to love Dart as much as he did. Lucas was the closest, so Dustin thrust his pet into his hands.

"He's like a living booger," Lucas said, wrinkling his eyebrows in disgust. He turned and handed Dart off to Will as quickly as he could.

"Oh, God, he's slimy," Will said, and passed him off to the nearest person, which happened to be Max. She took Dart in both hands and held him up to her face. She squinted her eyes as she studied him.

"What is he?" Mike asked in an academic tone, looking at Dart over Max's shoulder.

"My question exactly," Dustin said. He grabbed his library books and slapped them down on the table. "At first I thought he was some type of pollywog." Just in case she didn't understand, Dustin turned to Max and added, "Another word for tadpole, which is the larval stage of a toad."

"I know what a pollywog is," Max said, looking up from the pollywog in her hands. Dustin wondered about the tone in her voice. Was she annoyed, or impressed with his knowledge? He couldn't tell. He decided to press on.

"Then you know that most tadpoles are aquatic, right?" He said, opening one of the books to a page he'd already marked. "Well Dart: he isn't. He doesn't need water."

"Yeah, but aren't there non-aquatic pollywogs?" Lucas asked.

"Terrestrial pollywogs? Yep," Dustin told him, opening another book to show him. "Two, to be exact. Indirana Semipalmata, and Adenomera Andreae. One's from India, one's from South America. So how did one end up in my trash?"

"Maybe some scientists brought it here and it escaped," Max offered, setting Dart down gently on the table.

"Do you guys see that?" Mike asked. "It looks like something's moving inside of it." He moved the table lamp a little closer to shine some more light on Dart. The pollywog screeched and crawled away from the lamp as fast as his little forelimbs would carry him. His panicked hops carried him right over the edge of the table, but Dustin caught him before he fell.

"It's Ok, I got you little guy. I know you don't like that." After making sure that Dart felt safe and content in his hand, Dustin turned back to his friends. "And there's another thing. Reptiles: they're cold blooded, Ectothermic, right? They love heat, the sun, Dart hates it. It hurts him."

"So if he's not a pollywog or a reptile..." Lucas asked.

"Then I've discovered a new species," Dustin said, beaming with

pride. He petted Dart with one finger, while the little critter chirped and gurgled happily.

The school bell rang, startling everyone out of their own thoughts. Dustin stashed Dart back inside his backpack and hurried out of the AV room along with his friends.

"We've got to show him to Mr. Clarke," Lucas suggested as they headed down the hall to their next class.

"No, what if he steals my discovery?" Dustin protested.

"He's not going to steal your discovery," Mike told him.

"You know, I'm thinking about calling it: Dustonius Pollywogus," Dustin said brightly. "What do you think?"

"I think you're an idiot," Max said.

"You know, when I become rich and famous for this one day, don't come crawling back to me saying 'oh my God, Dustin, I'm so sorry for being mean to you back in 8th grade, oh my God-'"

"Listen," she said, shaking her head at his ridiculous impression of her voice, "What are you feeding him?"

"He likes nougat," Dustin told her.

"You're crazy," she scoffed. "Toads don't eat candy. They eat bugs."

"Well then he's clearly not a toad, is he?" Dustin replied.

"Where are you keeping him at home?" Max asked.

"I... have a terrarium," Dustin said, a little confused.

"Are you keeping the humidity up?" She pressed him. "It looks like he needs to keep his skin wet. You don't want it to dry out."

"Why all the question?" Dustin asked. "I know how to take care of a reptile."

"I thought you said he wasn't a reptile," she gloated.

"You know what I mean," Dustin said, now really confused.

"You're a real herpetologist, are you?" Max mocked him.

Dustin gaped at her, his mouth hanging open. "How do you know that word?" He asked.

"You aren't the only one who knows anything," she told him, smiling triumphantly.

"It's just..." Dustin floundered around, almost lost for words. "You just... don't seem like a science guy. I mean girl. You weren't really interested in Mr. Clarke's class today and-"

"I'm not a nerd like you," she told him. "But, I do know a little about reptiles. I have a pet Green Iguana. I used to have a ball python, too, but he got out once and my mom freaked out and said I couldn't keep him."

Dustin's eyes went wide. "Can I see him? I love iguanas."

Max considered for a moment before answering. "I'll tell you what. I'll show him to you, if you let me look at what you've got set up for Dart at your house. I want to make sure you aren't going to kill him."

"I'm taking great care of Dart," Dustin protested, feeling wounded.

"Do we have a deal, or not?" Max asked.

"Ok, ok, deal," Dustin said. "You can come over after school to 'inspect my work.'"

"Deal," Max said in a business like tone.

Dustin wasn't sure just how to feel. It had stung his pride a little bit to hear someone, a science outsider no less, question his capabilities. On the other hand, he had a really good feeling in the pit of his stomach about Max bringing her pet iguana over to his house. He looked over at Lucas, hoping to get some sort of clarity. Lucas shook his head and walked a little faster, moving away from Dustin and Max in the hallway.

3. Chapter 3

Author's note: We have these two very short scenes of Nancy and El to catch us up with where this story is in relation to Season 2, and then we move on to the new material with Billy drag racing outside the school.

Nancy sat on the hood of Johnathan's car, staring sadly at the ground. She'd barely touched her lunch and, though she found it easy to talk to Johnathan, and he always understood her, there was nothing he could say to make her feel better. He friend was gone, and nothing could bring her back. Steve was mad at her, and had every right to be. She was mad at herself. And the people at Hawkins lab were just sitting in there, doing whatever it was they did every day, happy and safe because no one could ever make them pay for what they'd done. Something caught her eye, and she looked up from the ground.

Another high school kid, who she knew but didn't really like, had just put on his headphones and started listening to music on his walkman. Nancy sat up a little straighter as a thought came to her.

"Your mom's boyfriend..." she began, turning back to look at Johnathan. "He works at Radio Shack, right?"

"Yeah, why? What are you thinking?" Johnathan asked.

She was silent for a moment, the beginnings of a plot forming in her mind. "Do you want to skip 4th period?" She asked him.

"The school? It's about a mile that way," the nice woman with the baby said to Eleven. She pointed, and El looked in that direction.

"A mile, at least," the nice woman said. "Where are your parents."

There it was, El thought. The woman was getting suspicious. A lot of people acted that way around her. From what El had been able to gather over the past year, all kids had parents, and all kids went to school. Since neither of those was true for El, she would always draw

suspicion from people who didn't know her. She briefly remembered the manager of a grocery store asking her the same question: "Where are your parents," just before she'd stolen some eggos from him. It seemed easy for people to see that there was something wrong with El. It bothered her, but it was the least of her worries right now. She wanted to find the school, and she didn't need this nice woman slowing her down, even if she meant to help. El didn't need help. She needed to find Mike.

With a quick twist of her head, she pushed the child's swing so that it began spinning on its chains. The nice woman and her child turned to look at it and, while they were distracted, El quietly slipped away.

Principal Coleman looked up from his desk, his attention drawn by the sound of car engines revving. He sighed in exasperation, and tried to get back to work. The sound came again, louder than ever. He threw down his pencil in disgust and got up to look out the window. Just as he'd suspected, there were two cars sitting side by side in the middle of the road, their teenaged drivers talking to each other through the opens windows as they revved their engines in a display of machismo.

Principal Coleman had no patience for that kind of foolishness. He was responsible for the education and well being of all the kids at Hawkins Middle, and he was seldom impressed by the older kids from Hawkins High School. HIS kids were usually respectful and academically minded, while THOSE kids seemed to have grown up just enough to learn to disrespect their teachers and disregard the school rules. He'd never work over at the high school, not even if the school board offered to double his pay.

The two teenage drivers, only one of which he recognized, hit the gas and tore off down the little street that ran along side Hawkins Middle and along side his office. As long as those high-schoolers kept their disrespect and their loud music and their cigarettes over on their side of the fence, he tried to pretend they didn't exist. But these two had the audacity to drag race right next to his office. He'd telephoned Principal Murphy over at the high school several times before and advised that she punish offending students in some appropriate way, but to no avail. Principal Murphy seemed to want to go along to get

along, and he had no patience for that. If she couldn't keep her high school students under control, then it was up to him. Fortunately, this time, the teenagers were breaking an actual law, instead of just his school rules. The speed limit outside of Hawkins Middle was 25, and these two were jetting up and down the road like airplanes on a runway. He picked up the handset on his office phone and dialed the number for Hawkins police, where he was answered by the overworked but professional voice of Flo, who had actually been a few years ahead of him in school.

"You've never shot a bear," Officer Powell said, shaking his head.

"Sure I have," Officer Callahan argued. "My old man used to take me hunting up north."

"A baby bear, maybe" Powell said. "A little teddy bear, I could see that."

"It wasn't a baby," Callahan insisted, his pride wounded. "It was big and angry. I could have been killed."

"How big was it?" Powell asked in a skeptical voice.

"About 800 pounds," Callahan said proudly.

"A black bear?" Powell asked, matter-of-factly.

"Uhh... yeah, I guess," Callahan said.

"Black bears don't get that big," Powell told him.

"Well maybe it wasn't a black bear, then," Callahan said, annoyed. "Maybe it was a grizzly bear."

"Grizzly bears don't live around here," Powell said. "It's Ok, I liked the story, anyway."

"It wasn't just a story," Callahan said, waving his hands in exasperation. "All I know is it was a bear. And it was really huge, and really angry, and it could have eaten me and those hikers-"

"Oh, so now there were some hikers there, too?" Powell asked.

"But you know what?" Callahan said loudly, "I wasn't afraid. The whole time. I just knew what I had to do. And that's why I'm such a good cop now. I always know, no matter what happens on the job, I can handle it, because I've faced down a bear, and I wasn't afraid."

Powell laughed so hard that he jerked the steering wheel, and their squad car swerved a little on the empty country road.

"What? I'm serious," Callahan said, his face going a little red.

The radio squawked, and Powell struggled to contain his laughter as he answered.

"Yeah, Flo, what have you got?"

"I just got a call from Principal Coleman over at Hawkins Middle," Flo told him over the radio. "He says some kids are out drag racing down the bus route again."

"Copy that, we're not too far. Be there in a minute," Powell said.

"You think it's the Zimmerman brothers again?" Callahan asked, as Powell turned the squad car around right in the middle of the road, which was easy since there wasn't another car as far as they could see in either direction.

"Could be," Powell said. "Or that kid Harrington and his friends."

"Naah," Callahan said. "It's been a while since we've had any trouble from Harrington. I think he got scared straight. You remember when I chased him down Oak street that one time?"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure he was real scared of you," Powell said. "I don't remember how that one ended, though. Did you catch him or-"

"He's really fast, Powell," Callahan said irritably.

"With those long chicken legs of yours, I don't know why you couldn't keep up," Powell said and started laughing again. He cruised along at a leisurely 60 miles an hour. If it was the Zimmerman brothers, there

was no need to hurry. The two officers knew very well where those kids lived.

It didn't take them long to make it to Hawkins Middle, since nowhere in the town was really that far away. The sound of revving engines drew Callahan and Powell to the scene of the crime with no difficulty. As they approached, one of the two drag racers turned and fled, though the other remained defiantly right where he was. Powell didn't seem interested in chasing that one kid, and Callahan was sure they would just visit his house later and speak to his parents. Powell brought their squad car to a stop behind the one remaining car, not even bothering to turn on his lights.

"You want to take this one?" Powell asked.

"Why me?" Callahan asked.

"I'll wait here and get started on the paperwork," Powell said, taking a pen out of his shirt pocket. "Go get 'em, bear hunter!"

Callahan sighed as he unfolded his lanky frame from the squad car and walked over to the drag racer. He tried to put some authority into his pace as he approached. The kid inside the blue Camero had a bad mullet and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

"You know the speed limit around a school is 25," Callahan said, folding his arms in what he hoped was an intimidating gesture.

"Yeah," the kid said, slouching back in his seat as if he was bored.

"I might have to write you a ticket, you know. What's your name, son?" Callahan tilted his face back so he could look down his nose at the kid.

"Billy," he answered, blowing a lungful of smoke toward Callahan.

The officer took a deep breath to give him a lecture about obeying the laws, but he choked on the smoke and had to stop to cough. "Listen," he said, once he'd cleared his throat. "Here's the problem with you high school kids. Your parents buy you a car, and you think you're all grown up. The world is yours. Well, you're not grown up yet. Billy, is it? You're still young. Maybe when you're an adult, you'll

look back on this childish behavior and be ashamed. You know, being an adult is all about responsibilities. Me, I have a job, and bills, and a wife, and-"

"What's your wife's name?" Billy asked, sending another cloud of smoke toward Callahan.

"Roxanne," Callahan said, distracted. "Anyway, I was saying-"

"Maybe I should get to know her," Billy interrupted. "She probably needs some excitement in her life."

Callahan spluttered and stepped back from the car. "You little punk!" He yelled. He glanced back at the squad car, where Powell's face was buried in the paperwork, then back to Billy, who took another long drag on his cigarette.

4. Chapter 4

Author's note: I've never liked the El/Max rivalry, and I've never liked the scene where El throws Max off her skateboard. And I also that it was a missed opportunity that Stranger Things never revisited Troy the bully a year after El broke his arm, so here is what El does while the boys are at the school. Don't worry, we're going to get back to Dustin and his Demogorgon real soon.

El peered out from behind a tree. There was the school, just like she remembered it. She'd been in there twice before. The first time, she'd gotten to see an entire room full of children her own age, and had gotten to save Mike from a bully. That one had felt pretty great. The other time she'd been inside Hawkins Middle had been truly terrible. She purposely shut out all the memories of that night as she continued to peer around the tree. She could see the entrance to the school. Dozens of kids streamed in and out of the doors, so there was no chance of going in that way without being seen. Maybe she could walk in, anyway. She had longer hair now, and she was wearing clothes that Hopper had given her, so maybe she'd be able to blend in to the crowd.

Even as the thought first came to her, El dismissed it. She'd never be able to blend in. Whether it was the nice woman she'd met an hour ago, or the equally nice and interesting Mr. Clarke she'd met a year before, people always knew she wasn't normal. These kids at Hawkins Middle all knew each other. They all spoke in the same fast and careless way. They all had families. They were all normal, and they'd be able to spot right away that El wasn't one of them.

She considered going around the back and entering through one of the smaller doors where there would be less eyes on her. She also considered just waiting where she was, hidden behind a tree, until Mike and his friends came outside, but then she asked herself just what her plan really was. Did she actually want to talk to Mike? That would make Hopper really angry, but maybe not much more angry than he would already be, since she'd broken their three "Don't Be Stupid" rules. Or did she just want to see Mike from a distance, to see him with her real eyes instead of just inside her head as she had for

the past year? She'd come all the way out here without really knowing what her plan was. She'd only known that she had to do SOMETHING. She couldn't be locked up in the little cabin, listening to Mike call out to her on the radio every night, hoping for an answer but never getting one. She couldn't take that anymore. She needed to so something.

But what did she really plan to do? If she did see Mike and his friends walking out of the school together, would she be able to just watch from a distance? Would she be able to stop herself from running out there and hugging him as tight as she could and telling him that she'd heard him every night for 353 days? And then what? Would she go back home and tell Hopper she was sorry for breaking every one of his rules and sorry for doing everything short of knocking on the window at Hawkins Lab and letting them know she was still around?

Somehow, while she was thinking, her feet had begun to move on their own. She took first one step toward the school, then another, and then another. She was in full view of the kids, coming and going from their school, but most of them didn't seem to notice her yet. She was still pretty far away. If she turned back now, no one would ever know she'd been there. She took a few more steps, and noticed a police car parked in the middle of the road that ran along side the school. She changed her path a little to keep out of sight of the police car. A few kids glanced over at her as they passed by, but she still wasn't close enough for any of them to recognize her face or try to talk to her.

She took a few more steps. El's eyes fell on a bike rack. There were four bikes standing side by side there. She recognized them easily. She'd ridden on the back of one of those bikes before. She slipped around the side of the school where she could still see the bike rack without being seen herself. Maybe when Mike and his friends came out to their bikes, she could get their attention somehow and get them to follow her back into the trees where they could talk without anyone seeing them.

A startled sound caught El completely by surprise. Scolding herself for being so careless, she spun around to see who had made the noise.

She recognized his face very well. A boy stood there, frozen in shock, clearly unable to believe his own eyes. She'd seen his face more times than she wanted to. He was the boy who bullied Mike. He was the boy who'd almost killed Mike. She held her breath for a moment, as frozen as he was, unsure of what he would do.

He yelled again, this time afraid instead of startled. The boy turned and ran, tripped over the even ground and fell on his face, then got up and ran again.

El winced, sure that everyone in the school would hear him yelling. She crouched down against the corner of the building and peeked around at the boy's back as he ran for his life. He ran past other kids and past a big yellow bus and past parents in their cars arriving to pick up their kids. He ran right to that blue and white police car. El felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. She hated herself for being careless enough to be seen. She hated that she NEEDED to hide in the first place. Of all the dozens and dozens and dozens of normal kids that she'd seen at this school, she was the only one who couldn't walk outside in broad daylight. She was the only one who had to hide. She was the only one who couldn't see the people she loved. She was the only one who wasn't normal. She hated it.

As she watched the boy, the bully, talk to the two police men in their blue and white car, pointing wildly in her direction, she knew she couldn't stay. With one last look at Mike's bike, she turned her back on the school and slowly retreated into the trees.

5. Chapter 5

Author's note: This is something that I think was basically implied in Season 2, but we never got to actually see. I'm sure Dr. Owens DID hear about El over the radio, and that would put even more pressure on Hopper. I think that makes it just a little easier to understand why Hopper got so angry when he and El had their big fight at the cabin. He really just loves her and wants to keep her safe!

"Well, you were right about these pumpkins," Dr. Sam Owens said to Hopper as they looked out over a field full of the rotting plants and a dozen men in white hazmat suits taking samples for study back at the lab.

"So what exactly do you think is going on here?" Hopper asked, his patience almost worn out. Dr. Owens seemed to be taking the whole situation far too casually. Hopper's past experience, as well as a strong feeling in his gut, told him that the rotting pumpkins were connected to something much bigger, much darker, and much more dangerous than they seemed. He was annoyed that Dr. Owens wasn't taking it very seriously. If it turned out that Owens knew something and was purposely downplaying it, lying to Hopper, then he was going to be a lot more than annoyed.

"Well, I told you what I think," Owens said, shutting down Hopper's question. "But we'll run the tests and we'll see what comes up. In the meantime, I just need to you to keep the area clear for us." His voice grew very casual, as if he didn't know the size of the task he was asking of Hopper. "I don't think it'll be more than a day or two."

Hopper stared at him. People lived on these farms. He couldn't just make people get up and move out of their homes while Owens' agents ran around and did their tests. "What do you want me to tell people?" He demanded.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out," Owens said. With an arrogant little pat on Hopper's shoulder, he walked away to his car.

Hopper glared at the man's back, wondering if it would be

appropriate to throw one of the rotting pumpkins at him.

"Hey, Cheif, you copy?" Came Powell's voice over the radio. Hopper unclipped it from his belt and replied into it.

"Yeah?"

"You remember that Russian girl Murray was going on about the other day?" Powell said.

Hopper's head snapped around to look at Owens, who had paused with one hand on his car door. How close was he? Had he overheard Powell on the radio? Before Hopper could tell him to shut up, Powell continued.

"I'm at the middle school and we've got a kid here who claims-"

Hopper pressed the talk button to silence anything else coming from Powell's end. He didn't want those words spoken out loud anywhere, much less over an open radio channel. He brought the radio an inch from his mouth and hissed into it, "Stay where you are. Do NOT move." He jumped into his truck and tore out of the muddy driveway, throwing gravel behind him as he went. He could only hope that Owen hadn't heard Powell's voice. That was assuming he could keep quiet whatever it was Powell had found. How many people had seen something? What had they seen? If he couldn't cover it up quickly, he didn't even want to think about what would happen.

El must have left the cabin. He had told her a million times. Three rules. That was all he asked her to follow. Three rules, to keep her safe and out of sight. He knew she'd been upset this morning, but he never expected she'd break all the rules and go outside. He'd made those rules to keep HER safe. What was she thinking? What was she doing?

That was easy to answer. He could guess what she was doing. She wanted to see that Wheeler boy. Hopper had known it, he'd been worried about it, but never once did he think she'd be crazy enough to walk right into the school and go looking for Mike. She was smarter than that. She'd lived on the run from those government agents for a month, all alone out in the woods. She knew as well as

he did how dangerous it was to let anyone, anyone, see her.

But she'd done it now.

His heart wouldn't stop pounding as he raced through Hawkins at 80 miles an hour, even going off road once to get around a slow farm tractor that couldn't get out of the way fast enough. His radio squawked again as he sped past a full school bus and into the middle school parking lot.

"Chief," Powell said over the radio.

"I'm here, stop talking," Hopper barked. Each word that went over the radio was like a hard punch to the gut. Hawkins Lab had to be monitoring all the radio channels all the time. He slammed on the brakes and came to a stop right behind Powell and Callahan's squad car. The two officers were standing outside their car talking with a kid.

"Oh Jesus," Hopper breathed as he jumped out of his truck. Of all the kids that could have seen El, THIS one knew her face. He was one of the few people in Hawkins who would have been able to recognize her on the spot.

"Chief, what's wrong?" Powell asked, real concern on his face as Hopper stalked over to them.

"What happened?" Hopper demanded, not answering Powell.

"You remember this kid," Callahan said, nodding toward the kid, Troy. "Came in last year, said a girl broke his arm-"

"I remember," Hopper snapped. "What happened?"

"I saw that freak again," Troy said angrily. "She was here, at the school."

"Did anyone else see her?" Hopper asked the kid directly, ignoring his two officers.

"I saw her!" The kid insisted. "I'm not making it up."

"Did anyone else see her?" Hopper demanded again, his voice rising.

"No... it was just me," the kid said, confused.

"Cheif, what's going on?" Powell asked again. Again Hopper ignored him.

"Alright here's what I need you to do," he said, looking from one officer to the other. "I need you to go and block off Eugene's farm. There's been a chemical leak from the lab. The soil is toxic. Don't let anyone get near it. I want you to stay there until I come get you. Don't go anywhere, and don't let anyone get close. Just stay there and wait for me."

"Chemical leak?" Callahan asked.

"Are you sure you want-" Powell began.

"You heard me, go!" Hopper said.

"What about the kid?" Powell asked him.

"I'll take care of this, now get over to that farm," Hopper said.

Powell stared, clearly reading more into the situation than Callahan was, but Hopper wasn't going to let him ask any questions and get any more pieces to the puzzle.

"You need me to explain it again?" Hopper demanded. "Get in the car, and get over there, now."

With obvious reservation, Powell climbed behind the wheel of the squad car. Callahan, mercifully less aware of the real situation, got in next to him and the two of them sped off, leaving Hopper alone with the kid.

Hopper rounded on him and scowled. The kid lifted his chin defiantly.

"Tell me what you saw," he ordered.

"I saw that freak girl, I told you," the kid said. He pointed toward one

corner of the school where the property came close to the tree line.

"Let's take a walk," Hopper said, heading off in that direction. Troy followed him reluctantly. It was getting later in the day, and most of the kids seemed to have gone home. The fact that there weren't crowds standing around and talking about the mythical Russian psychic girl was very encouraging. Maybe this would be small enough that he could keep it from spreading.

"She was right here," Troy said, pointing to a corner of the building. "She was just standing there, like a creep. I think she was spying on someone."

Hopper crouched down in the same spot and tried to see what El had seen. He searched around in the grass for a minute, too, to see if she'd dropped anything. Finding nothing, he stood up and turned in a full circle, taking in the terrain. This looked to be the edge of the school property closest to the tree line, so, if El had been moving through the forest trying to stay out of sight, it made sense that this was where she would have come out. He turned back to Troy.

"And what happened when you saw her?"

"I went to tell your two cop buddies," Troy said. "She's dangerous. She might have attacked me again."

"Trust me, kid, if she wanted to hurt you, you wouldn't be talking to me now," Hopper told him. "So you saw her here, looking for someone, then she saw you, and you ran away? Is that it?"

"I didn't run away," the kid argued.

"Ok, fine, but did anything else happen?" Hopper insisted. "Did she say anything to you, or to anyone? Did anyone else see her?"

"No," Troy said, annoyed.

"Did you see where she went?"

"No," he said again. "The freak must have run away when she saw me go to the cops."

Hopper pressed his fingers hard against his temples. He needed a cigarette, badly. His mind raced through all the possibilities as he fished his lighter out of his pocket. If no one else had seen El, maybe he could still salvage the situation. The best case scenario would be if she'd gotten some sense scared into her when she'd first been seen, and that she would go back to the cabin where it was safe. The worst case scenario would be if she was still running around town, just asking to be spotted by more people. He very briefly wondered if she was still lurking around the school. He swept his gaze around the area again, his eyes finally falling on the empty bike racks by the front doors. No, if the bikes were gone, then the Wheeler kid was gone, which meant El had no reason to still be here. He suddenly wondered if El hadn't run away after being spotted, if she'd waited until the Wheeler kid came out of school and rode off on his bike with him. That seemed like a stretch to Hopper, but he considered driving by the Wheelers' house to check anyway.

He decided against it. The best thing to do was hope that she'd done the right thing and gone back to the cabin. He'd head back there now, and hopefully find her waiting inside, eager to apologize for breaking the rules. He would try to be understanding. He remembered being 13, after all. His own parents couldn't have kept him inside all day even if they'd chained him to his bed. He knew it was a lot to ask for El to stay locked up all day, but her situation was completely different. There were people from the government, people right in Hawkins, not more than a few miles from the cabin where El slept, who were eager to take her away and lock her in a tiny room with no windows where she'd never see the light of day again. He was sure she understood that. He was sure she understood that everything he did was for her own safety.

"So are you gonna go look for her, or are you just gonna stand there?" Troy asked, breaking through Hopper's thoughts. He realized that he'd burned through his whole cigarette in less than a minute while he'd been worrying about El. He tossed the butt on the ground and stomped it out.

"Let me show you something, kid," Hopper said. He looked to his left, then to his right, then to his left again. There was no one around on this side of the school. The two of them were alone.

He turned around and grabbed a fist full of Troy's collar, twisting it hard.

"Hey! Wh-"

"Quiet," Hopper said, twisting the collar harder.

The kid made another noise, and Hopper pulled him in close and brought his face down so their eyes were on the same level.

"Here's what's gonna happen," Hopper told him. "You and I are gonna forget about all of this. You don't say a word to anyone. Anyone, do you hear me?"

All of the kid's earlier defiance and bravado were gone. He stared with wide eyes at Hopper and nodded a panicked agreement.

"I'm not playing with you," Hopper insisted. "If you tell anyone about this, I'll know."

Troy nodded again.

"The girl was never here. You didn't see anyone today. Understand?"

The kid's voice cracked as he tried to say "Yes."

Hopped let him go with a little shove. "Good. Then get out of here. And remember, I'll be watching."

Troy ran away without looking back. Hopper lit another cigarette for himself as he watched the kid go. He knew Troy's mom better than he wanted to. She'd been in his office a few times, and she was a nightmare. If she heard the story from Troy, there would be no keeping it quiet. Hopper had to hope he'd scared the kid enough that he wouldn't tell. He could feel bad about what he'd done later. For now, he needed to find El. As he'd decided earlier, he'd check the cabin first and hope she was there.

He didn't drive 80 miles an hour on his way to the cabin, but he didn't drive the speed limit, either. His nerves were on the very edge, and he wouldn't be able to loosen up even an inch until he knew El was safe. Before he'd even made it outside of town, though, just as he

was passing the gas station on the way to Cartersville, Flo's voice came over the radio.

"Chief, do you copy?"

"Yeah, I'm here Flo, go ahead," he said through gritted teeth. Whatever was going on back at the station would have to wait until he'd found El.

"I got a call from a Doctor Owens just now," she told him. "He wanted you to call him at the office. He said you'd know the number."

Hopper's blood froze in his veins.

"Great, Flo, I'll call him when I get back in, thanks," he said, his voice almost giving out. He wasn't going to wait until he got back to the office, though. He slowed down, though not nearly as much as he should have, and pulled into the gravel on the side of the road so he could make a wide U turn and head back to the gas station he'd just passed.

He held the steering wheel in a death grip, and his heart-beat refused to slow down. Since he'd just spoken to Owens an hour ago, he knew the doctor wasn't calling just to catch up. Since he knew the Lab had probably bugged all the phones in Hawkins, he had to assume Owens knew what had happened at the school.

So why was the doctor calling him? To gloat? To threaten? To let him know that his agents had already gotten their claws on El? No, he couldn't let himself think that. Even though he told himself not to, visions swam through his mind of El being dragged, kicking and screaming, back down into that lab where she'd been kept prisoner for every day of her life until a year ago. That wasn't even the worst thing they could do to her. They might fly her away to some hidden government facility underneath a mountain where he'd never find her.

As he skidded to a stop in the gas station's gravel driveway next to their outdoor payphone, he tried to will his racing heart to slow down. Sweat was beading up on his forehead, despite the November cold, and his fingers shook as he punched in the phone number. It

took him a second to realize why his body was refusing to obey his commands, and another second to admit it to himself. He was afraid.

The number that Owens had given him a year ago, when they'd begun their unhappy relationship, went directly to the phone in his office at the Lab. He waited, trying to get himself under control as the phone rang once, then twice. He imagined returning to the cabin, only to find it empty, with signs of a struggle. If agents from the Lab came for El, he knew she wouldn't go without a fight, and she could put up one hell of a fight. She'd probably bring the whole cabin down on their heads. But he also knew that They could bring more to the fight than just the Lab itself. After sending all the men with guns that Hopper assumed Owens hand under his command, They could bring more and more people from who-knows-where. Government agencies were like that. They were impersonal, emotionless, shadowy, and relentless. One way or another, they'd get what they wanted.

Unless you could outsmart them. Unless you knew how to hide. As long as you didn't take stupid risks. *Please, El,* he thought to himself. *Please be home when I get there. Please be safe*.

The phone rang a third time before the doctor finally answered.

"Owens here," the man said. Hopper hated the cheery, disarming voice that Owens usually put on. He knew the man could be as cold as iron, if he wanted to.

Hopper found himself lost for words, which he was not used to at all. He didn't know how he should approach the situation. If Owens already knew everything, then denying the truth wouldn't do him any good. Maybe he should charge in head first. Maybe he could put Owens off balance if he attacked first. If he told the man that he'd fight for the girl, fight with everything he had against whatever Owens came after them with, maybe the man would think twice. Maybe it would give Hopper enough time to find El and get her out of Hawkins where she could go even deeper into hiding.

He abandoned the idea as soon as it came to him. Owens wouldn't be intimidated. If it came to that, the man would be as emotionless as the shadowy agency he represented. Hopper decided that the only option was to play dumb, and hope with all his heart that Owens

didn't already know everything.

"Yeah, Owens, it's the Cheif," he said, trying to sound irritated instead of afraid. "I got your message. What do you want? I'm busy."

"I'm sure you are," Owens said, as annoyingly cheerful as ever. "The way you flew out of that pumpkin farm, I thought the police station must have been on fire or something. It had me worried."

"I'm really touched," Hopper said sarcastically. "Are we done here? I've got things to do."

"You're too busy to talk to me now?" Sam asked, as if he were actually hurt.

"It turns out I have to get some farmers to leave their homes for a day or two while you run your tests. Isn't that what you said?" Hopper mocked. "That's not as easy as it sounds."

"Well, I have complete faith in your abilities," Owens told him. "Listen, you sound a little on edge. Are you sure everything's alright?"

"This small talk's great," Hopper said, digging his lighter out of his pocket.

"I'm concerned," Owens said, sounding genuine. He was a great actor.

"Don't worry about me," Hopper said, lighting the cigarette in his mouth.

"Oh, this might be nothing, but I thought I overheard something about... I don't know what it was, a Russian girl or something?"

"Just a prank," Hopper said, way more forcefully than he should have, and then cursing himself for it. If Owens didn't already know, he didn't want to give the whole thing away by acting guilty.

"What do you mean a prank?" Owens asked.

"Just a dumb kid at the school," Hopper said. "Looking for attention, making up stories."

"So this kid really didn't see anyone?" Owens asked. "You looked into it?"

"This kid's a real delinquent," Hopper told him. "I've had him in my office before. He even pulled a knife on this other kid one time. I wouldn't trust a word he says. Like I told you, he's looking for attention."

"Ok, I guess you know your people," Owens said casually. "I was just curious. You know it would be a major thing if there was a Russian girl running around Hawkins. Or if that other girl from last year was still around..."

Hopper threw his lighter across the empty parking lot. His free hand clenched and unclenched into a fist. He wished Owens was right there so he could hit him, but he was alone.

Trying desperately to keep his voice from giving him away, Hopper said, "That girl died, along with Brenner and everyone else."

"Really?" Owens asked. "They never told me that they found a body or anything."

"Maybe they didn't look hard enough," Hopper said.

"Ok, well I trust you, Hop," Owens said, as if he hadn't just said anything out of the ordinary. "But, listen, if you DO hear anything else, you know, from someone more credible than this kid, let me know right away, will you?"

"Sure, why not?" Hopper growled.

"Because that missing girl would be a huge deal, like I said," Owens continued. "It would bring a bunch of Suits down on Hawkins. You know, big government types. The kind of people you don't want poking around your little town."

"I'd hate to think what that's like," Hopper said.

"They would come down pretty hard on anyone they found with this missing girl, too," Owens went on, ignoring his comment. "I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt."

"Mhm," Hopper grunted.

"And just one more thing to keep in mind," Owens said, the very smallest hint of steel creeping into his voice. "I've been doing this kind of thing for a long time. The people upstairs, they called me in because I have a reputation for cooperating, you know? Getting the best out of people. But if it turns out my approach isn't working, they'll be happy to replace me. If they feel like the whole cooperation thing isn't getting results, they'll bring in somebody who's a little more... heavy handed. Nobody wants that, right?"

Hopper only glared at the lifeless payphone as he listened to the other man's words.

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up," Owen said, going back to his usual, affable voice. "I'll let you get back to it." He hung up the phone without waiting for a response. Hopper leaned against the payphone for a long minute, wishing he could feel relieved. It could have been a lot worse. Owens still didn't know for certain that he was hiding El, or he wouldn't have wasted his time with word games. He got back in his truck and started it up, hoping with all his heart that he'd just find El in the cabin when he got back. If she'd gone anywhere else, if anyone else saw her...

He didn't want to think about how close he'd come to losing her today.

6. Chapter 6

Author's note: We're back to the Lucas/Dustin story line happening at the same time. Like I've said earlier, I wanted to give those two something more to bond over on top of the video games, and more specifically, something that Lucas doesn't have.

Max skated down Grant road on her way to Dustin's house. She'd never been there before, but he'd told her which roads to take, and there weren't that many roads in Hawkins. She had to swerve to avoid another pothole, cursing the tiny little town that didn't know how to fix its own roads. The swerving motion seemed to alert her pet iguana, and he poked his head out of her backpack.

"Not yet, big guy," she told him, reaching back to close the zipper so he wouldn't fall out. "We're almost there."

The house that must have been Dustin's came into view up ahead. She kicked the skateboard up into her hand and paused, looking the house over for any clues. It was nice, but only one story. It seemed that Dustin's parents made a little more money than hers, but they weren't super rich, either. There was only one car parked in the driveway, which might have meant that Dustin's dad wasn't back from work, whatever he did. She saw a single bike, Dustin's, leaned up against the garage door, but no other bikes or toys or anything in the yard, which suggested Dustin might be an only child. Her iguana nosed the zipper open again and stuck his head out of her backpack.

"Stay there," she told him. "What if they have a dog? You don't want to come out yet."

Max decided to stop playing detective and just go right up to the front porch. She knocked on the door and waited, fidgeting just a little, before a woman holding a cat answered.

"Yes? Oh, hi. Yes? Are you selling cookies?" The woman asked. She was about ten years older than Max's mom, and pretty well dressed for just sitting around the house. The orange cat in her arms meowed. Max felt her iguana sink a little deeper into her backpack.

"What? Oh, no, I'm not a Girl Scout," Max said. "I'm... Is Dustin home?"

The woman's eyes went comically wide, and she went to great effort to put on an extra welcoming face.

"Oooooh, are you 'friends' with Dustin? From school?" She asked, in a very friendly but very weird tone. "I've never seen you around before."

"I'm new," Max said, feeling a little under the microscope. "My family just moved to Hawkins."

"Oh, well it's so nice to meet you. Come inside, please," she turned yelled down the hallway, "Dustie! Your little friend from school is here." She ushered Max over toward the couch. "I'm so sorry sweetie, I didn't ask your name. I'm Claudia, Dustin's mom. But I'm sure he already told you that. And this is Mews, my other baby. And your name is?"

"Max."

"Ohhh, that's such a pretty name. I don't know any girls named Max. Are your parents um... young?" Dustin's mom asked.

Max made a confused face. She wasn't exactly sure what Mrs. Henderson was asking. "Uhh... we're from California," Max tried.

"Oh, yes, that explains it. So, can I get you anything? I have juice, coffee, cookies, I have- Oh, there you are, Dustie!"

Max looked up to see Dustin emerge from the hallway. She felt a little wave of relief at being saved from Mrs. Henderson's extra-kindness.

"Hi, Max," Dustin said, a happy smile spreading across his face. Max wasn't sure if she liked it or not.

"Dustie, you didn't tell me you were bringing a girl over," his mom said, with a face like Christmas morning itself. Max rolled her eyes.

"Ok, mom, thanks... for that. Alright, well, why don't I show Max

around the house, starting with my room," Dustin said, stumbling over his words.

"Hold on, let me get you two some milk and cookies," Dustin's mom offered, waving them toward the kitchen.

"We're fine, mom, thanks. We'll just go now," Dustin said quickly.

"Oh, why don't you let me show Max where the kitchen and the bathroom are," his mom offered brightly. "In case she gets hungry or needs to-"

"Mom, I've got this!" Dustin said in a panicked voice. He tugged on Max's sleeve and pulled her down the hall.

"Are you keeping dart in you roo-" Max started to ask.

"Yes! You can come see Yurtle, of course," Dustin said over her, turning his head over his shoulder so his voice would carry back to Mrs. Henderson. Then he leaned closer to Max and whispered, "Don't mention Dart. My mom doesn't know about him yet." Max gave him a confused look as she followed him down the hallways and into his bedroom.

He shut the sliding door as he mom called after them, "You kids have fun, now. I'm here if you need me."

"Sorry about all that," Dustin told Max once they were alone. "She gets excited. I don't bring friends over very often."

"I bet," Max said. She turned in a circle and surveyed his bedroom, taking in the porcelain ET on his desk, the space ship poster on his wall, and the Ghostbusters "Certificate of Anti-paranomal Proficiency" on his wall. "God, you ARE a nerd," she said.

"Don't be jealous of all my awesome stuff," Dustin said.

"Why are you keeping Dart a secret from your mom?" She asked him.

"It's on a need-to-know basis," he told her. "The more people who know about my discovery, the more chance there is for someone to steal it. Until I've published my findings-"

"Published your findings?" Max asked, unsure if he was joking or not.

"Yeah," Dustin said, picking up a black and white paper catalog off his desk. The title said "Indiana Herpetological Society Quarterly." Dustin leafed through it so she could see. "Their next issue comes out in January. I'm going to submit an article about Dustonius Pollywogus. That will cement my position and keep anyone else from claiming the discover for themselves."

"Wow," Max said, as sarcastically as she could. What a nerd.

"So until then, I'm only showing Dart to The Brain Trust," Dustin continued, undeterred. "Oh, and you, of course."

"The Brain Trust?" Max asked, not sure if she really wanted to hear the answer.

"That's me, Mike, Will, and Lucas," Dustin said proudly.

"Oh," Max said. "I thought Lucas called you guys 'The Party.'"

"No, no, The Party is different," Dustin said. Max braced herself for a long explanation. "See, The Party is a D&D term. I'm our Bard, Mike's our Paladin, Will's our Cleric, and Lucas is our Ranger. That carries over into school and stuff, too. Our Party is how we support each other and how we face challenges."

Max decided not to ask what a Bard, Paladin, Cleric, and Ranger were.

"The Brain Trust is different," Dustin went on. "It's my organization. I'm the president, secretary, and treasurer, but I nominated Mike as the vice president. Will and Lucas are Members Emeritus. I use The Brain Trust sometimes to answer questions or give me feedback on a new theory."

"Uh-huh..." Max said, not sure whether she should laugh, or whether that would really offend Dustin and his Brain Trust.

"Hey, do you want to join The Brain Trust?" Dustin asked, his eyes lighting up. "It's just a really short application form, and then the current members vote you in at our next meeting."

"That sounds like a lot of work," Max said evasively.

"I suppose, as the president, I could grant you temporary membership, but the whole Trust would still have to vote on it at some point."

"Thaaaanks?" Max said.

"So, anyway, you didn't bring your iguana?" Dustin asked, switching to a new topic at the speed of light like he often did.

"Oh, no, I have him right here," Max said, slipping her backpack off her shoulders. She set it down gently on Dustin's bed and opened the zipper. She was glad to be back on a subject that she had at least some understanding of. Most of Dustin's world seemed completely alien to her, especially the D&D stuff.

"His name's Godzilla," she said proudly, as he slowly climbed out onto Dustin's bed.

"Whoa," Dustin said, his eyes going wide.

"He's 47 inches long from nose to tail," Max said proudly. "That's a little misleading. Iguana's have really long tails."

"Still, I bet he's at least 15 inches without the tail," Dustin said appraising.

"Sixteen," Max corrected, giving her pet a maternal look.

Dustin nodded in appreciation. Godzilla swung his head slowly from left to right, taking in his new surroundings and scanning for predators. He must have been content with what he saw, because the iguana didn't run or try to crawl back in the backpack. Tentatively, Dustin reached a finger toward his scaly head.

"He won't bite," Max assured him. "He's pretty used to humans by now. I've had him two years."

The lizard shrunk back slightly from Dustin's probing finger, but only slightly. He stayed where he was and let Dustin rub his neck. Max ran a finger along the impressive ridge of spines on his back.

"My mom found him at a small pet store in Chinatown," Max said. "They weren't treating him right. He had this tiny UV lamp, and they were trying to feed him crickets."

"No," Dustin said, his eyebrows wrinkling in concern. "Everyone knows iguanas don't eat crickets."

"I know," Max said, scowling at the memory. "We totally saved him from that place."

"Your mom likes reptiles, too?" Dustin asked. "She must be pretty cool."

"MY mom?" Max said with a small laugh. "No, my mom's into pretty dresses and braided hair. She just knew I'd love an iguana."

"So you're not into dresses?" Dustin asked conversationally. Max made a disgusted face at the idea. "Chinatown..." He said, again switching to a new subject without warning. "Is that where you lived? I mean in California?"

"What? No," Max said, trying to keep up with where Dustin went. "Chinatown isn't a city. They have them in a bunch of places. It's where Chinese people live. They have shops and stuff."

"Oh," Dustin said. "We don't have a Chinatown in Hawkins."

"Nooope," Max said, making a face. "Hawkins doesn't have much, does it?"

"We have an arcade," Dustin said, still absentmindedly scratching under Godzilla's chin.

"Found that," Max interrupted, but Dustin kept going.

"We have a grocery store, a radio shack-"

"Sounds real exciting," Max said, rolling her eyes.

"We have a Shaky's Pizza Shack, there's Myrkwood, well we don't go there anymore..."

"Like I said," Max replied, feeling as though Dustin had made her point for her.

Dustin stopped scratching Godzilla's chin and started rubbing his scaly belly. "It looks like you're feeding him plenty."

"He's up to 13 pounds," Max said, beaming at the iguana. "He was only 9 when I got him." She opened the small side pocket of her backpack and pulled out a small handful of dandylion leaves for Godzilla. He happily accepted them when she placed them on the bed next to him, indifferent to Dustin's belly scratching while he ate.

"Does he like arugula?" Dustin asked suddenly, his eyes brightening. "I just fed some to Yertle."

"Yertle?" Max asked.

"Oh yeah, let me introduce you," Dustin said, sliding off the bed and crossing his room to a glass terrarium on the floor in one corner. He gently lifted out a small tortoise with one hand, and a few pieces of the leafy green arugula with the other. He placed them both on the bed next to Godzilla.

"Here you go, buddy," Dustin said, poking the leaves toward the iguana. "Godzilla, meet Yertle. You two can share the arugula, Lady and the Tramp style. Keep it strictly professional, Ok?"

Max leaned in for a closer look at the sandy colored tortoise.

"His shell looks really healthy," she commented.

"Yeah, I know how to take care of a reptile," Dustin said proudly. Max tried hard to keep from making a face. Sometimes she wondered if Dustin could hear the things he said. Her eyes strayed from the two congenially eating reptiles on the bed, to the terrarium on the floor in the corner of Dustin's room, and then to the larger terrarium placed on a desk. She guessed that might have been Yertle's original home, before Dustin had adopted the pollywog.

"Is that it?" Max asked, nodding toward the larger terrarium.

"Sure is," Dustin said, jumping off the bed. He eagerly went over to

the tank and scooped his new pet up with both hands. Max also went over, crouching down to inspect the pollywog's home through the glass. Her eyes roved over the water dish, the small rock cave, and the heat lamp, which was appropriately turned off.

"Does he crawl into the water dish?" Max asked.

"I haven't seen him do it yet," Dustin said, looking at her over the top of the pollywog in his upraised hands. "Maybe he doesn't need to soak his skin in water. Maybe he just drinks it, and then secrets water through his pores to keep his skin moist."

"Maybe," Max said. "I think you should lay down some moss in here." She pointed to the dirt and sand in the terrarium, which might have been fine for the dry-skinned Yertle. "Moss holds moisture better. This sand might be drying out his skin when he crawls over it."

"Hm, Ok, you have a point," Dustin admitted.

"And have you figured out what he eats besides nougat?" She asked.

"Not yet."

"Do you want him to starve?" Max asked. "You should get him a few different plants and bugs and see what he goes after."

"Already on my to do list," Dustin said, reaching over her shoulder to tap a well wrinkled spiral bound notebook on the desk next to the terrarium. Max looked down at it and saw, in Dustin's messy handwriting "find more foods for Dart."

"Want to help me forage for bugs out back?" Dustin asked brightly.

Max gazed back at the mystery animal in Dustin's hands for a long time, intrigued. "Do you really think he's a new species?" She asked, more thinking out loud than really asking Dustin.

"I sure do," he said anyway.

7. Chapter 7

Author's note: Just a quick detour to remind you where our other characters are. Their stories haven't really started to diverge yet, but they WILL. Since this one's fairly short, I'm posting two chapters today.

Hopper skidded to a stop on the muddy path that passed for a road way out in the woods. He threw his truck into park and tore the keys out of the ignition, almost forgetting his hat as he jumped out and headed off on foot to his cabin. He'd walked the dirt path countless times, but he'd never before been in such a hurry. Now it seemed that every rock, every root, every fallen tree branch was an obstacle purposely put in his way to slow him down.

He breathed a small, very small, sigh of relief when found the tripwire still in place, and the cabin door shut. That meant that the agents from Hawkins Lab hadn't come storming in looking for El. That was something.

He almost stumbled over the wire as he rushed over to the front door, which turned out to be unlocked. He hadn't really expected that the Lab had found El in the cabin. If they had, Owen's wouldn't have been thinly veiling his threats when he and Hopper had spoken on the phone. So the worst hadn't happened. Not yet, at least. But, as Hopper pushed through the door and into the dark and empty cabin, he didn't feel much relief. Wherever El was, she wasn't here, and she wasn't safe. Every minute she spent out there was more chance of her being spotted and recognized, or of her using her abilities in front of people. He didn't remember being this scared in a long time. Not when he'd stolen a guard's key card and gone poking around inside Hawkins lab. Not when he'd woken up in his trailer, drugged by agents from the same Lab. He'd only needed to worry about himself back then. Now it was different.

His mind raced to all the places El might be. He'd need to check them all, but where to start? Hawkins wasn't a big place, and he could search it faster if he brought in help. There were three officers on duty today, including Callahan and Powell. If he told them what to look for, they could cover more ground. But that was a bad idea. The

more people who knew about El, the more danger she was in.

Slamming the cabin door shut behind him, Hopper raced back out to his truck, almost stumbling over the trip wire again.

"Are you sure about this?" Jonathan asked, pacing Nancy's room nervously.

"No," Nancy admitted. Still, though she knew how much trouble she might be landing herself and Jonathan in, she decided to go through with the plan. Grabbing her phone off her nightstand, Nancy dialed the number.

"Hello, Marsha speaking," came the answer. "Hello? Hello?"

Nancy hesitated. She might also be dragging Barb's mom into a world of trouble that she hadn't asked for. At least Nancy and Jonathan knew how dangerous Hawkins Lab could be. Mrs. Holland had no idea. Was it right for Nancy to include her in the plot?

"Mrs. Holland... It's Nancy," she said at last.

"Nancy?" Barb's mom asked.

"I uh..." Nancy looked to Jonathan for encouragement. "I need to tell you something... Something about Barb."

Hopper stood outside the cabin's door, furiously smoking his tenth cigarette. He'd been running on adrenaline for hours, and his nerves were about shot. He stared into the trees, quickly turning into shadows as the sun went down. He'd looked everywhere for El but had found not a sign of her. He'd gone back to search the school. He'd knocked on the Wheeler's front door. He'd sneaked around back and pressed his face up to the glass of the Wheeler's basement windows. He'd even driven past the Lab several times, just to see if they seemed to be mobilizing any of their men and vans, but they weren't. That had been risky. People at the Lab could easily have noticed him acting strangely and started looking around themselves. If they found El before he did...

After nearly a year of going off to work his boring, quiet job as the police chief of a town where nothing ever happened, while El sat quietly in the cabin with the doors locked and the curtains drawn, he'd gotten too complacent. He knew it now. He should have known it long before now. No thirteen year old kid could stay cooped up inside for that long and resist the temptation to go outside. Kids didn't understand how dangerous the world was. He should have known better. He had only himself to blame. As usual.

How many times had it been his fault? How many things in his life had gone horribly wrong, just because it was HIS life? The black hole.

He heard a twig snap.

His eyes darted over the trees, quickly sinking into the approaching blackness of night.

There she was. One small shadow emerging from the other shadows. The vice that had been squeezing his stomach suddenly let go and he could breathe again.

Even from this distance, Hopper could make out the expression on her face. She wasn't scared. She wasn't sorry. She was defiant.

His jaw clenched so tight that he couldn't speak as relief that she was alive and safe gave way to anger.

8. Chapter 8

Author's note: Just another (very) short update on where Nancy and Jonathan are so you don't forget about them, because they will be really important later. Then a brief Hopper and El scene. I think in my heart I just want to justify the Hopper and El fight, because I love them so much and I know they love each other so much, even though they said some pretty ugly things. After that, we get back to Lucas/Dustin/Max, the main characters of this story. I know you probably can't tell, because I jump around a lot, but they are indeed the main cast. We also get a quick little scene with Billy, because he's soon going to become very important to this story as well. It's going to take off a lightning speed soon.

Nancy fast-walked from her house, trying not to look suspicious. She'd just told her mom that she was planning a sleepover at Stacy's. In fact, Jonathan's parked car waited for her at the edge of the cul de sac. She could feel bad about lying to her mom, or she could feel good about putting her plan into motion and getting some justice for Barb.

Jonathan tapped his fingers nervously on his steering wheel as he waited for her.

"Hey," he greeted her as she threw her packed bag into his back seat. The bag was NOT for a sleepover at Stacy's, as she'd told her mom, but the plan might require a night in a motel. This Murray Bauman guy lived pretty far away. Of course, that was assuming that Hawkins Lab didn't lock them away for the rest of their lives. Looking at Jonathan, her willing partner in crime, Nancy swallowed her fears and braced herself for their big plan.

Hopper drove another nail into a board he'd hastily thrown in place over a broken window. After El's psychic tantrum last night, the cabin looked more like a war zone than a home. He turned around to grab another nail when he noticed that her door was open.

He tensed, wondering what they would say to each other the morning

after that big fight. A few gentle apologies rose up in his mind, but so did a few stern rebukes. He felt bad for some of the things he'd said. Hell, he felt bad that he had to keep El locked up here in the first place. But he also couldn't risk her thinking that her behavior was Ok. If she ever ran off again, the people from Hawkins lab might see her and take her away again. That thought made his stomach lurch. Though he hadn't even known El existed a year ago, now he couldn't imagine being without her. At some point, without realizing it, he'd come to think of her as a second daughter. Losing his first had almost killed him. He knew he couldn't go through something like that again.

As his brain searched for the right words, El made the decision for him, swinging her door shut before he could say anything. She clearly didn't want to talk.

Frustrated beyond words, he walked over to her door. He stood there for an eternity, just staring at the door.

"Hey, kid? Listen um... About last night, I uh..."

He couldn't think of how to say all those things that had raced through his mind in the span of a few seconds. He wasn't sure a kid of thirteen would even understand if he did try to explain. She just hadn't lived enough life yet to understand. Maybe when she was older, she'd look back and see things differently, but now she needed to be protected. Right now, more than anything else, he had to make sure she stayed put, where the men from the Lab wouldn't find her.

"I want this place cleaned up by the time I get back and then maybe I'll consider fixing the TV."

Lucas thrust his bike into the rack outside the school's front doors as he had hundreds, or maybe thousands, of times. Even through some pretty wild experiences, like when his friend had been taken to another dimension, or when a monster had chased them into the science classroom and tried to devour them, school still seemed like the same, normal, unchanging place to him.

"I think Johnny Storm is the most powerful," Lucas continued, talking

as he walked.

"No way," Dustin argued, shoving his own bike into the rack last and hurrying to catch up with his friends. "Invisibility is a way more useful power. The bad guys can't fight what they can't see."

"Fire is so much stronger," Lucas insisted. "Pyrokinesis, man."

"What do you think, Mike?" Dustin asked. "Johnny Storm or Sue Storm?"

Mike shrugged and shook his head. Lucas could see he wasn't in a mood for their friendly debate this morning. That happened sometimes. Only in the last year, though. Only since their mage had vanished in a cloud of ash that one night. Sometimes Lucas missed his friend, the old Mike who didn't sink into the shadows whenever he thought of her. Lucas' eyes flicked to Dustin. From the look on his face, Lucas could see that he was trying to think of something to say that would cheer Mike up. Lucas had tried that for a while, but it never worked. Even after a year, Dustin was still trying. Lucas gave him credit for that.

Lucas' eyes went from Mike to Will as they pushed through the doors to Hawkins Middle. On that same night a year ago, they'd lost a new friend, and regained their old friend. It was really tragic that El couldn't still be with the party today. Lucas wished, had wished many times over the last year, that they could have saved her somehow. But he understood that they'd been fighting way outside of their league. El and the demogorgon were like Gandalf and Sarumon in a wizard's duel, while Lucas, Mike, and Dustin were no stronger than hobbits. It was sad, but it was true.

"Hey Max!" Dustin said brightly, interrupting Lucas' thoughts. There she was, coming down the hallway toward them. Lucas tried to push away the thoughts of last year and all the dark things that had happened then.

"Uh, hi Max," Lucas said, trying and failing to sound as upbeat as Dustin.

"Hi," she answered quickly, walking past him and right up to Dustin.

"So, how was he this morning? How is he eating?"

"He's looking fat and happy," Dustin beamed. "He ate pretty much everything I put in front of him."

Lucas stared at them for a moment, perplexed, though they didn't notice him staring. It clicked after a minute. He remembered that they must have been talking about that gross pollywog, though Lucas couldn't for the life of him understand why a girl would be interested in a toad baby. She and Dustin seemed to be right on the same page, though.

The bell rang as they shuffled through the door into first period.

Billy slouched into his chair at the back of class, a full ten minutes after the bell. It wasn't that he'd arrived to Hawkins High late. He couldn't do that, because he had to drop Max off at Hawkins Middle, and his dad would kill him if she came home with a report card that said she was late every day. Instead, he was late to class because he and Tommy H had taken the extra time to smoke behind the gym. His new "friend" Tommy had jumped at the chance to be his tour guide through this new school. That was fine with him. He could tell that Tommy was a natural born follower, and he didn't mind being followed.

He kicked one boot up onto his desk as he reclined even further, already bored out of his skull after only 30 seconds of hearing his first period English Lit teacher drone on about something. He actually stopped in the middle of his lecture to stare at the impolite boot. Billy stared back, daring the teacher to say something, but the middle-aged man in a sweater-vest declined to comment and returned to whatever he'd been talking about. Billy chuckled to himself and pressed his fingers into his temples, massaging them hard. Only 40 more minutes of this torture. English Lit was the most boring class he could think of, and this guy was even more dull than his English Lit teacher in California had been.

A girl who sat near the middle of class turned in her seat to look back at Billy with an approving smile. Did she hate English Lit, too, he wondered? Or did she just like to see disregard for authority? He

pretended not to notice until she turned back to the front of the class. He pretended to be just as bored as he had been before. After waiting long enough that it didn't look like he cared, Billy looked over toward Tommy's desk.

"Hey," he hissed in a half whisper, then nodded toward the girl. "Who's she?"

Tommy's eyebrows rose in a conspiratorial look. "That's Vicki," he explained, leaning closer so he wouldn't have to talk so loud. "She only moved here last year. Used to be quiet as a mouse. Now she likes bad boys. Go for it, man."

Billy shrugged, slouching away from Tommy as if he wasn't interested.

Dustin plopped his lunch tray down on the table. Today he had macaroni and meat loaf, sadly, without chocolate pudding. He didn't worry about the lack of pudding for long, though. Inexplicably, Max slid her tray right next to him and sat down. He tried not to make a big deal out of it, though he made sure not to meet Lucas' eyes as the rest of the group sat down.

"Hey, why don't we go to the arcade after school today?" Dustin asked, hoping he didn't sound awkward.

"But it's Thursday," Lucas said.

"We go to the arcade on Thursdays, sometimes," Dustin protested.

"Since when?" Lucas asked.

"What do you think?" Dustin asked, turning to Mike for help. His friend took a second to look up from his lunch tray, and when he did, his eyes were distant. Mike seemed to need a few seconds to play back what Dustin had asked him, then he shrugged in response. Mike wasn't feeling great, and Dustin hadn't been able to say anything to cheer him up all morning. He felt bad, but right then he needed help, so he looked to Will.

"You?" Dustin asked.

"Yeah, I'm in," Will said, smiling. Good old Will. The kid had more reason than any of them to be down on himself, but he never seemed to lose the ability to find happiness in the little things.

"Will's in," Dustin announced, as if the others hadn't heard it themselves. "Max, what do you say to the arcade?"

"Ok, I guess," she said, casting a bemused eye at each person around the table. Dustin held his breath. She had no way to know why Mike was so quiet today. And she probably didn't know why Lucas was so testy. Or why Dustin was so insistent. But if they would all just agree to go, and stop being a bunch of drama queens, then they'd all have a good time, Dustin included. Maybe it would help to pull Mike out of his funk. And maybe it would help Lucas to not feel like Dustin was cheating on him by spending time with Max. And maybe it would make Max feel more at home in a town that couldn't possibly measure up to whichever gold and marble metropolis on the West Coast she'd come from.

Dustin was pulled out of his internal thoughts as he felt Max stiffen in her chair. He looked over and saw her staring away from the table in mild alarm. He followed her eyes, and immediately understood.

"That's Glenn, The Janitor," Dustin whispered to Max. Even at this distance, Dustin felt he should keep his voice down. The Janitor had notoriously good hearing.

"He fought in 'Nam," Lucas chimed in, his voice an even mix of fear and awe. "That explains all the..." Lucas waved his hand around his face, alluding to the scars.

Max continued to stare across the cafeteria and into the hallway beyond, where The Janitor dragged a heavy trash barrel behind him. The heavy load made his limp even more pronounced than usual.

"They say he took two bullets in the leg, and kept on fighting," Lucas explained.

"I heard it was three," Will offered in chilled tones.

"I heard it was a grenade," Dustin said, still keeping his voice

respectfully quiet.

"Either way, he's a machine," Lucas said. "They say he can't feel pain. I wouldn't get in his way, not for anything."

Max looked even more alarmed. "He looks..."

"Creepy?" Dustin supplied.

"It's called the Thousand Yard Stare," Lucas told them. "They say soldiers get it after they've seen too much."

Dustin watched Max continue to stare until The Janitor was completely out of sight. She gave a visible shudder.

"I wouldn't worry," Dustin told her, in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. "He mostly keeps to himself." There was a long silence in which some of the friends went back to their substandard lunch food. Dustin looked to Will again for help, then tried to get back on track.

"Sooooo... Arcade after school?"

"I still have some quarters," Lucas said, which was good enough for Dustin.

"Don't you have to get home and feed him?" Max asked.

"You mean Dart?" Dustin said.

"I think he needs a better name," Max replied.

"I discovered him, so I get to name him," Dustin insisted. "And no, I don't have to get home. I left him plenty of food. He shouldn't be hungry for a good long while."

"Fine, I could go to the arcade, but after I want to see how he's doing. The wrong kind of food could be bad for him, you know," Max said.

"If you insist," Dustin said, trying hard not to look at Lucas again.

By the way, if you don't remember who Vicki is (because they

don't say her name in the TV show), you can see her in Season 2. She's one of the three high school girls staring at Billy's tight jeans when he first shows up in his car.

9. Chapter 9

Author's note: El is on the same track as in Season 2, finding her way to Terry Ive's house. The boys are doing things a little differently, though, now that Max has shaken things up. I'm really looking forward to writing some of these Billy and Max scenes, too. He's the same Billy, but just a little different.

El stared at the door for a long moment. She didn't know who would answer the door, or what she was going to say or do when they did. She only knew that Mama was here. Mama.

She had a Mama.

For most of her life, she'd never even thought about it. She'd had a Papa, and that was all. It hadn't been until after escaping from that miserable lab that she'd even realized that everyone had a Mama. Mike and Will and everyone on the TV she watched and everyone in those books Hopper read to her... they all had a Mama, except for her.

Except that she DID have a Mama. It was just that people had been lying, LYING to her for her entire life. Papa had lied to her, or at least, never mentioned that she had a Mama. Hopper had lied to her. That much was certain. He'd even had photos of Mama hidden away in a box, and he'd flat out lied to El's face, telling her that Mama was gone. But now she knew better.

Pushing away all those thoughts, trying to focus on the present and forget the past, El knocked on the door.

There was no answer, so she knocked again.

"Go away, I'm not interested," came an unfamiliar voice from inside.

It was obvious to El that the woman on the other side of the door didn't want to be bothered, but she NEEDED to see get inside. With her face scrunching up in frustration, she started smacking her hand against the door, and didn't stop until it suddenly swung open.

A little gold chain kept it from opening more than a few inches, but a woman's face appeared in the gap, wearing an annoyed expression.

"Look, I don't want your thin mints, alright kid?"

"Thinmints?" El asked, suddenly more confused than frustrated. She had never heard that word before.

"Or your religious mumbo jumbo. Whatever you're sellin, I ain't buying. Ok?" The woman slammed the door in El's face, startling her.

El stared at the locked door that stood between her and Mama. Her timid confusion at the very unfamiliar situation was quickly draining away to be replaced by anger. She was tired of everyone lying to her. She was tired of hiding from the Bad Men. She was tired of living in a little cabin. She missed Mike with all her heart. And she wanted to meet the Mama that she'd gone her whole life without knowing. She was done with asking permission. No one was going to stand in her way this time.

She'd seen the little chain that kept the door locked. Focusing her mind, and imagining where it hung on the other side of the door, she slid it easily out of place and swung the door open. A single drop of blood fell from her nose.

The woman inside the house turned around and stared at her in shock. El didn't care who she was or what she thought of the strange girl with a bloody nose on her doorstep.

"I want to see Mama."

Max fell out of step from the other four as they pushed through the front doors and headed for the bike rack.

"I'll see you guys at the arcade," she said.

"You can ride with us," Dustin offered. "Mike's bike has pegs for a rider."

"No thanks," Mike said.

"Or you just... you know, ride your board and hang on to my bike," Dustin tried. "I can pull you."

"My 'brother's supposed to drive me home," Max said. "My mom thinks I can't skate all the way there. Like it's dangerous to skate on the roads, or something. Like there are even enough cars on the roads here to watch out for."

"...Okay," Dustin said, clearly looking for another way.

"Look, it's fine, I'll just ask my mom to make Billy drop me off at the arcade in an hour. I'll meet you guys there. Now I have to go. Billy gets pissed when I'm late."

"Uh, Ok, well we'll save you a spot on Dig Dug," Dustin called after Max as she left. She waved impatiently to them as she rounded the corner of the middle school and headed for the high school parking lot. Her "brother" was leaned up against his car, smoking a cigarette. But he wasn't alone. Three other high schoolers, including a freckle faced boy and two girls, were with him. She slowed her pace to give them time to finish up their conversation, because Billy would only be annoyed if she came into the middle of his so much older and so much cooler friends.

The highschoolers departed after a minute, and Max timed her arrival just right. Billy would be more agreeable about taking her to the arcade if he wasn't already annoyed. She got in the car and rode in silence for the first few minutes. This was their new routine, now that they lived in Hawkins. Back in California, Max had ridden the bus home and hadn't had to put up with Billy's attitude as part of her daily ride home. Here in Hawkins, though, she lived off the bus route, so they rode in silence, not asking each other how their day was or gossiping about their classmates. Max assumed that was what you called a dysfunctional family.

She watched the trees and mailboxes pass for another minute before she came out with the question.

"Can you please take me to the arcade later today?"

She'd said it without any attitude in her voice. She'd asked instead of

demanded. No one could say she'd given Billy any reason to say no.

"No."

"What? Why not?" She demanded. "It would take you five minutes, the speed you drive."

"No," he repeated.

"Don't be an ass Billy," she argued. "I did your half of the dishes last week, just like we agreed, so you owe me a trip to the arcade."

"Hey, watch the language, shitbird," Billy said.

"Just give me one good reason why you won't!"

"Because, Max," Billy said, exasperated. "I have a date tonight."

"Oh, so that means your going to spend all day in your room doing your hair?" Max said.

"You want me to throw that thing out the window?" Billy asked, half reaching for her skateboard.

"Ugh, forget it," Max said. "I'll just ask mom."

"Good luck with that," Billy told her. "Dad and Susan are gonna out shopping until late again. And don't even think about skating to the arcade. You know Susan thinks its too dangerous."

"Like you care," Max said.

"Hey, like it or not, I'm responsible for you," Billy said, in a tone that suggested he didn't like it any more than she did. "So forget about the arcade today. You can go some other time."

Max half groaned, half growled in frustration and threw herself back in her seat.

"Do you think she's still coming?" Dustin asked, looking at his watch.

"For the hundredth time, I don't know," Lucas complained. "Stop

asking me."

The three of them huddled around Will, who was tearing it up on Asteroid. He couldn't match Dustin and Lucas at Dragon's Lair, and it had been a long time since he and Mike had the top score at Dig Dug, but Asteroids was Will's game. His forehead wrinkled in concentration as he blasted away at the drifting polymorphs. The others cheered him on with plenty of gusto, at least when Dustin and Lucas weren't asking why Max hadn't joined them.

"Here it comes!" Lucas said eagerly.

"That's it!" Dustin shouted. "That's it. There it is! A new record!"

"He's not even done yet," Lucas added, grinning.

"He's about to get another 2,000," Mike said, his voice quieter but just as intense.

"It looks like 4,000 to me," Dustin said.

Boom!

Will's luck finally ran out. He jumped away from the game and pretended to yell a great "Noooooo" to the sky, but he couldn't shake the ear to ear smile from his face. Lucas jumped in and high fived him.

"Just wait," Lucas said to Will. "I've been saving up to buy Asteroids for the Atari. Once I get it, I'll practice every night, and then I'll come for you high score."

"I'll be ready!" Will said confidently.

Dustin watched the scene play out for a minute. He loved seeing Will in his element, God-knew that Will hadn't gotten nearly enough things to celebrate in his life, especially in the past year. It was great to see him whenever he got a win, whether at life or in a game.

One of the other very few times where Will got to win big was in their D&D games, but Mike hadn't been up for DMing much lately, and the others just didn't have his flair for story telling, so they didn't

play much without him.

Will finished his celebration dance with Lucas and then ushered Mike toward Asteroids. "It your turn," Will said.

"Don't break your streak," Mike replied. "Play another round."

"I'm out of quarters," Will said, still just as happy as Dustin had ever seen him. "You play."

"Here," Mike said, handing over his own quarters to Will. "You can't stop in the middle of a streak. It's a rule. Keep going."

Will bought Mike's excuse and happily used the gifted quarters to start another round. Though Mike's logic was sound (one should never stop in the middle of a winning streak), Dustin saw right through him. Mike just didn't have the heart to play today. Dustin felt for him, but he couldn't think of what else to do for his friend. Sometimes Mike seemed Ok, but other times it seemed there was nothing that could cheer him up. Even the things that he used to love just didn't mean as much as they used to. Dustin knew why, but he had no idea how to make it better.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dustin spotted an unfriendly face in the crowd of kids playing the arcade machines. He slapped Lucas on the arm at pointed. Troy was heading their way, though it looked like he wasn't paying attention or hadn't noticed them yet.

"What is it?" Will asked.

"Keep your eyes on the game," Mike encouraged. "You can't stop now."

The three of them closed ranks around Will as Troy approached. The kid who had once been two grades ahead of them had actually been held back last year, which had only made him meaner. They didn't run into him too often these days, but they tried to keep their distance when it did happen.

Suddenly, Troy looked up and spotted them. He froze in his tracks.

Dustin didn't know what to make of it. The bigger, meaner boy had

once given them a little bit of respect back when El had rightly taken care of him, but that had been a year ago, and Troy's memory of the experience had faded fast. He'd been back to his vindictive old self not long at all after their trouble at the quarry. But now, here in the arcade, Dustin saw a fresh note of fear in Troy's eyes.

They stared at him for a long and painful moment, and he stared back. Then he spun on his heel and left. He kept walking, out through the door, and then headed off down the sidewalk. Dustin gaped as he watched through the arcade's big front windows. There Troy was, leaving them alone and heading home as fast as dignity would permit.

"Well I'll be a stuffed-" Dustin began.

"What just happened?" Lucas asked.

"I have no idea," Dustin told him.

"What?" Will asked, his eyes still on the game, as Mike had told him.

"Troy..." Lucas said.

"I guess we scared him off," Dustin said, barely believing it himself.

"I have been getting a little taller," Lucas suggested. A second later, he glanced at his watch. Reflexively, Dustin did the same. Max was over an hour late. Had she ditched them?

"I guess it's a good day, then," Will said. Dustin blinked, needing a second to remember that Will was talking about Troy.

"Yeah," Dustin agreed, not quite as boisterously as he would have liked. He noticed Mike, then. Mike wasn't watching Will play Asteroids anymore. He was staring off at at one of the walls, lost in thought. The smile on his face was at once happy and sad. Dustin couldn't describe it any other way. Seeing Troy must have triggered a happy memory for Mike.

"That reminds me," Lucas said, bringing Dustin's mind back from where it had been wandering. "Will broke another record, so Keith owes us another slice."

"That's right," Dustin said, turning a full circle to look for the assistant manager of the Palace Arcade. The title was largely honorary. Keith was barely a half step above the regular arcade employees. Dustin spotted him, with his purple shirt and long black hair, over by the pizza counter. Perfect. He would have to walk all the way over to them, all the way back to the pizza counter, and all the way over to them again. Dustin waved to catch Keith's eye, and then motioned him over, as imperiously as possible.

Keith rolled his eyes, and took his sweet time sauntering up to the Asteroids machine.

"What are the fantastic four up to today?" He asked sarcastically.

"Save it, Keith," Dustin said. "We want our free slice."

He pretended not to understand.

"Don't play dumb this time," Lucas warned him. "Will broke his high score again. Bring us the free slice."

"Hi," Will said politely, still keeping his eyes on the game. He was the only one of the four who didn't have the heart to take part in their semi-good natured hatred of Keith.

"Again, Byers?" Keith asked, exasperated. "Ugh, fine. I'll be right back."

Dustin hoped that Will was soaking in every bit of the glory that he could, politely or otherwise. Victories didn't come easy or often.

Lucas gripped Will's shoulder and congratulated him once more. Then he said, "You know what, guys? I'm actually out of quarters, too. And I have some homework that I didn't finish during study hour. Since this is a Thursday..."

"You're going home early?" Dustin asked in disbelief. "But the night's still young."

"Like I said, out of quarters," Lucas told him. "Sorry, man. If I'd known yesterday that you wanted to come to the arcade today, I could have made another few dollars mowing lawns. Sorry guys, if I

didn't have homework I'd stay all night."

He slapped Will on the shoulder one last time, and slipped out the door. Dustin watched him mount his bike and pedal off with a nagging feeling in the back of his mind. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Keith was back, with a single slice of pizza on a greasy paper plate.

"Palace-Arcade-Inc-thanks-you-for-being-one-of-our-valued-customers-and-congratulates-you-on-your-victory," Keith rambled off from memory, for what might have been the thousandth time in his life. Keith hated the Palace Aracade's owner and his silly sales gimmicks, and Dustin loved to push his buttons. He finished with the Palace Arcade motto, "Play Hard. Live Hard."

Dustin looked down at the free slice. "Nuh-uh, I don't think so," Dustin said. "Try again."

"Do you want the free slice, or not?" Keith complained.

"Yeah, we want a real slice, Keith," Dustin said. "This is half a slice, at best."

"Fine," Keith grumbled. "Wait a minute. Where's your fourth musketeer? Where's Sinclair?"

"He went home early," Dustin said dismissively.

Keith looked around the arcade with narrowed eyes, as if he expected Lucas to be hiding somewhere, ready to get the jump on him. He scowled back at Dustin. "I'm keeping my eyes on you."

Suddenly it hit him. The nagging feeling in Dustin's mind. He knew where Lucas was going. "Son of a-"

Hopper closed the door to his truck and trudged up the muddy, leaf strewn path to his cabin. Today had been one of his worst in a while. Joyce was worried because Will seemed to be getting worse. That worried Hopper, and he wanted to help, but there was almost nothing he could do. All the while, his mind was weighed down with

thought of his fight with El. There were so many things he wished he'd said differently, but at the same time, the idea of apologizing to a kid who needed to learn how to survive in the real world was too much for him. He'd spent the entire day half expecting to get another call from Dr. Owens, full of veiled threats about El. Hopper's nerves were stretched about to their breaking point.

He deftly stepped over the trip wire, which he was encouraged to see was still right where it should be, and climbed the steps to his porch. He gave his special knock at the door.

There was no answer.

Feeling a little panicked, he gave the special knock again.

When there was no answer a second time, Hopper grabbed the knob and tried to open the door that should have been secured with about a dozen locks.

It swung open easily.

His heart started racing as his mind conjured up images of El walking alone through the woods again. He pictured her walking until she stumbled across a chain link fence. The sign on the fence read Hawkins National Lab. He imagined white vans racing after her. He imagined them dragging El back down into that place, where she'd remain locked up for the rest of her life.

"El!" He shouted as he burst through the door. It was dark and quiet inside.

"Oh, God, please," he said to himself as his eyes darted around the room, looking for any sign of her.

There were papers and photos lying on the floor. Hopper rushed over to them, confused. The papers lay next to an open cardboard box. On the side of the box, in his own handwriting, were the words "Hawkins Lab."

His heart stopped.

"No, no, no," he said to himself as he spun around and sprinted back

out of the cabin.

If El had opened that box, then she would have found pictures of Terry Ives, and that might lead her to the house where the woman who had once been El's mother sat in a comatose state. Hopper was certain the men from the Lab kept an eye on that place. If El showed up there...

He jumped into his truck and tore off, his tires throwing mud as they spun. He HAD to find her before the agents did.

Author's note: So as you've probably noticed, this version of Season 2 is moving just a little slower. So in this story, Dart hasn't triggered Will into having his possession experience with the Mind Flayer on the school field, which means that Hopper hasn't followed Will's map down into the tunnels. Wow, season 2 moves fast, doesn't it? So in our version of the story, Will is NOT possessed yet, and Hopper is still going about his day job at Hawkins PD, which means that he comes home from a normal/ stressful day of work to find that El has run off after Terry Ives. The story is really starting to diverge from Season 2 now.

10. Chapter 10

Author's note: The Lumax begins

The quarters in Lucas' pocket jingled as he hit a pothole while turning from Elm street onto Maple. He knew the pothole was there, and he normally would have swerved to avoid it, but his mind was elsewhere. He knew that Max loved the arcade, so he didn't believe she'd just gotten busy doing something else and decided to skip on them. Sure, he and his friends weren't the coolest bunch in all of Hawkins Middle, but the arcade sure WAS. He could easily imagine Max turning down an invitation to a D&D game and instead going to the arcade, for example.

So he concluded that something must have gone wrong for Max. He knew her "brother" was an asshole, so visions began to swim through his head of Max locked in her bedroom, while Billy nailed boards across the door and windows, laughing maniacally to himself the whole time.

If Max needed help, Lucas was just the man for the job. He felt a little bad for ditching his friends, and for not inviting them to go on his rescue mission. But really, if Max was going to join the party, then he was currently going to help a fellow party member in distress. That was a noble and justified goal. The rest of the party should understand.

He didn't know exactly where Max lived, only that it was on Old Cherry road, and it would be dark soon, so his plan was to ask his dad to drive him down that road until he spotted Billy's car. That would be impossible to miss. He coasted past Mike's driveway and on into his own, past both his mom's car and his dad's. He walked his bike into the garage, climbed the three steps to the door, and had his hand on the doorknob when he paused. Lucas could hear raised voices coming from inside.

His hand still on the knob, he pressed his ear to the door, straining to hear. His mom and dad were arguing inside, though he couldn't make out what they were saying.

It wasn't the first big argument he'd overheard. In fact, there had been a lot more lately. It was a pretty new thing. He didn't really know how to process it, so he tried not to think about it. Maybe that would make it go away.

His stomach suddenly twisting itself in knots, he quietly opened the door and slid inside. He held his breath as he passed through the kitchen. His parents turned out to be in the living room, and he could probably make it to the stairs and up into his room without interrupting their fight.

"You're wasting yourself here!" Lucas' mom was shouting. "You could do so much more. Your brother would take you on at his firm tomorrow if you asked him. It's right there for you but you won't take it."

"Chicago? Really? That's what you want to do?" Lucas' dad yelled back.

"Just because you're too afraid to try for something more, you're going to keep our kids trapped here? So they can, what, work at the pizza shack? The movie theater? That's no kind of future!"

Lucas had made it to the stairs without being seen, but he paused halfway up. The words being thrown around downstairs didn't even register in his brain. It was yelling that upset him. His troubles with Dustin and Max seemed so much less important than they had just 30 seconds ago. The horrible feeling in his stomach grew worse. He didn't know what to think about his parents fighting. They hadn't done it when he was younger. He had no idea what had changed or how to fix it.

Downstairs, the fight seemed to have blown itself out, and Lucas heard his mom storm off into another room, and his dad sink into his armchair with a long sigh. Lucas stayed where he was. At first, he thought now would be a very bad time to ask his dad to drive him to Max's house. On the other hand, if he got his dad alone, maybe he could ask what all the fighting was about. Besides, he couldn't just go on up to his room now, or he'd just lay awake feeling sick to his stomach all night.

After waiting what felt like the right amount of time, Lucas shuffled back down the stairs and went into the living room. He found his dad still sitting armchair with a book in his hands, though it looked like he was staring at it rather than reading it. He looked up in surprise when Lucas approached.

"Dad, I, uh..." Lucas fidgeted with his hands as he stood there awkwardly. "Can you drive me to a friend's house?" To his surprise, his didn't refuse.

"Sure, I need to get out of the house for a bit anyway," he said, getting up slowly.

Counting himself lucky that it had been that easy, Lucas followed his dad out into the garage and climbed into the car.

His dad stared distractedly ahead as he turned the key in the ignition.

"Will's house?" he asked.

"Actually, no," Lucas told him. "It's a new friend. You haven't met her, but she lives on Old Cherry road."

"She?" His dad said in surprise.

"Yeah," Lucas said, almost a little defensive.

"And where does she live?"

"I've actually never been to her house," Lucas said. "I just know she lives on Old Cherry road. But if you take me there, I know I'll recognize their car."

His dad looked at him out of the corner of his eye, then shrugged and put the car into gear. He started to inch out of the driveway. "You know you can't stay too late. It's a school night."

"I know. It's just for an hour or two," Lucas said, deciding to press his luck. "And... do you think you could drop us off at the arcade?"

"Didn't you just come from the arcade?" His dad asked.

"Yeah, but, see, Max was supposed to meet us there. But she never showed. I thought maybe her parents were too busy to drive her or something."

"Max?"

"Well, Maxine, but nobody calls her that," Lucas explained.

His dad give him one last sidelong look before he said, "Ok, Max's house it is." They turned off of Maple street and onto Elm, bouncing over the same pothole that Lucas had hit a few minutes ago. "You know," his dad said gently, "Maybe Max didn't meet you at the arcade because her parents grounded her. She might not be able to come with you when we get there."

"Oh, that's not it," Lucas said. "She's a good kid."

His dad laughed. "Believe it or not, good kids get grounded sometimes, too. Just because you never cause us any trouble... Take your friend Mike for example. Good kid. Comes from a good family. I've never seen him cause trouble in all the years they've been our neighbors. But now? I heard he's graffiting the bathrooms, getting in fights at school, would have never believed it."

"That's different," Lucas said. "Mike's going through a hard time right now." He stopped there and said no more. His dad didn't know about El. At least, he didn't know the truth. He'd heard rumors about a Russian girl, which Mr. Wheeler now denied. Lucas had promised the party that he'd never talk about the things he'd seen in that science classroom that one night, or in that junkyard, or in the AV room at school, or in Mike's basement... Nobody outside the party could know the unbelievable stuff that had happened last year.

Thankfully, his dad took his word for it and left Mike Wheeler alone. They rode on in silence for a few more minutes before Lucas finally worked up the courage to ask about what was really on his mind.

"Dad? What was... Can you tell me... Why were..." He took a deep breath and tried again. "What are you and mom fighting about?"

His dad made a pained face and let out a long, slow breath.

"Well," he said after a long time considering his words. "Basically your mom thinks it would be better for you and your sister if we moved away from Hawkins."

Lucas shot up straighter in his seat. He hadn't expected that at all. "What? Why?"

"There IS a lot more out there in the world, Lucas, she's not wrong about that."

"We can't move!" Lucas spluttered.

"Your mom and I haven't decided anything yet," his dad said, trying to calm him down. "You know, in a place like Chicago, you and Erica would have so much more you could do. More schools, bigger schools with more arts and science programs and more sports teams, and when you get ready to go to college-"

"But I like it here!" Lucas protested.

"Did you know your mom is from Chicago? That's where we met. Did I ever tell you that?"

Lucas didn't answer. He wasn't sure if his dad was just trying to change the subject.

"I was a young, 23 year old law student going to John Marshall Law School in Chicago. We bumped into each other on our way to class one day, and that was it." A big smile slowly spread across his face as he told the story. "We got married as soon as we graduated. Now, I was this small town kid from a little place called Hawkins Indiana your mom had never heard of. I just always assumed after college I'd move back here and open my own law firm. The thing is... I never really asked her about it at the time. I didn't even think about it. I guess she always thought we'd settle down in the big city and start our family there. Only, she never said so until recently. I guess she's been keeping it inside all these years. I should have asked her first."

"Dad, we can't move," Lucas said. "We can't."

"Now, don't even worry about it. I'm sorry you overhead us fighting, but your mom and I will work it out. I want you to know, son,

whatever we decide, your mother and I will always do what's best for you and Erica."

"But-"

"We're here," his dad interrupted, pointing at the road. They had arrived at Old Cherry. Lucas didn't want to drop the conversation, but he didn't know how to react. His mind was spinning, and he needed time to process it.

"Tell me when you see the car," his dad said, trying to sound all normal again. He slowed to an easy cruise and let Lucas swivel his head from side to side, checking each driveway. Old Cherry wasn't a long road, and quickly reached the end where it ran into Randolph road.

"You didn't see it?" His dad asked.

"It's a big blue sports car," Lucas said, spinning in his seat to look back down the way they'd just come from. "We can't have missed it."

His dad turned around at the stop sign and headed back down the same road, a little slower this time. Lucas's head swiveled from side to side. He even made sure to look inside any open garages, in case that was how he'd missed it. He frowned, the disappointment of not finding Max's house mixing with his already unhappy feelings.

"I guess Billy isn't home," he said to himself.

"Who?"

"That's her skateboard!" Lucas said, pressing his face against the window. "I'd know that skateboard anywhere."

There it was, lying in the grass in front of their porch. There were no cars out front, so maybe they'd all gone somewhere and taken Max with them. He wasn't about to turn back now, though. Lucas jumped out of the car and crossed their small front lawn. By the time he'd reached the front door, his mind was already blanking on what to say. It suddenly struck him how weird this all looked, showing up at her house after she'd been a no-show at the arcade. He stood there frozen, with his hand raised, ready to knock on the door, trying to

think of how to begin.

'Hey Max, I was just in the neighborhood and I thought..." No.

'Max, there you are. The guys and I missed you at the arcade.' Nope.

'So this is where you live, you're a hard person to find, Max... Say, would you like to come with me to-" Just top.

The door swung open.

Lucas jumped back, his hand still raised, about to knock.

Max stared at him from inside, a confused look on her face.

"What are you doing here?" She asked.

"I uh..." Lucas let his hand drop. "We just didn't see you at the arcade so I just..."

She continued to stare at him, apparently confused by his awkwardness.

"Sooooo... Do you want to go to the arcade with me?" He held his breath.

"Ok," she said. "Why are you being so weird?"

"Great, my dad can drive us. He's right over there."

"Yeah, I can see that," Max said, stepping outside and closing the door behind her.

"Do you have quarters?" Lucas asked, hiding his smile. "If you don't, I have extra."

Author's note: I feel really, really bad for doing that to Lucas and his parents. I don't want to see them fighting, and I sure don't want to see them move away from Hawkins, but it is going to lead into a lot more things in the Lucas Max Dustin story. I actually got the idea in the first place from reading the Montauk script (the original, older draft of Stranger Things by the Duffer

Brothers). They had planned to have Lucas' parents going through a divorce, and Lucas was going to be very troubled (angry and acting out) over it during Stranger Things season 1. That's kind of interesting, considering that, in season 2, Lucas' parents might be the best in all of Hawkins. Anyway, I don't want Lucas' parents to get a divorce, and neither does he, but sometimes things happen that we can't control.

11. Chapter 11

Author's note: The Lumax continues, and Dart keeps on growing.

Dustin biked down Kerley road, thinking of things. He had a lot on his mind. Mike and Will. Lucas and Max. Dart.

He was supposed to show Max how Dart was doing tonight, but she'd never shown up at the arcade. She'd seemed pretty interested in coming over to check up on Dart when they were talking in the cafeteria, so he didn't understand what had changed.

He came up on his house and coasted to a stop before leaning his bike up against the garage. A small smile crossed his face when he walked past the aluminum trash can, quiet and empty now. His mom jumped up from her chair, shifting Mews into one arm as Dustin came inside.

"How was the arcade?" She asked brightly.

"Fine," Dustin said. He didn't have time to recount it all, not with Dart waiting in his bedroom.

"Did you get enough pizza while you were there?" She asked. "I have some leftovers."

"I'm fine mom, thanks. Wait..." He remembered that he'd already eaten and or fed all of his halloween candy to Dart, and it would look suspicions if he went outside foraging for bugs this late at night. Dart needed to feed.

"Actually, mom, do you have any arugula? Oh, and some salami, I'll take that too."

"Ok..." she said, giving him a confused look, but bustling off to the kitchen just the same. With his plate of food in hand, Dustin hurried into his bedroom and closed the door. He set the plate on his bed, tossed his backpack onto the floor, and removed the blanket draped over Dart's terrarium.

Dustin's eyes went wide. It was Dart alright, but he had bloated to at

least twice the size he had been when Dustin left for school that morning. He had legs, two. A big, meaty, froglike pair of hind legs splayed out from his sides. Dustin marveled at his pet's new form. He was growing fast! At this rate, Dustin guessed, he'd probably lose his tail soon. Who knew how fast he'd be fully grown. He made a mental note to get a camera to document the changes. The scientific community would want to know, once he was ready to publish. Or maybe he'd ask Will to do some drawings. Some of his zoology books had some very nice sketches of animals at each stage in the transition from baby to adult.

Dart waved his eyeless head up and down, apparently aware that Dustin was nearby and had brought food. "That's right big guy," he said. "You know it's me, don't you? Did you miss me? I brought dinner." He dropped the food into the terrarium, and was shocked to see how fast Dart snapped it up. "Wow, you were hungry, weren't you? You need more, don't you? Yes you do."

Dustin opened his bedroom door only half way, and closed it quickly behind him. He hadn't taken the time to cover Dart with a blanket again, and he didn't want his mom to catch a glimpse of anything.

"Hey mom, I'm actually still hungry," he said, heading into the kitchen. "Do we have more arugula?"

Lucas looked around the arcade one last time. Mike, Dustin, and Will were nowhere to be seen. They must have gone home while he was looking for Max's house. He felt a little guilty. He hadn't known for SURE that they'd go home and leave the arcade to him and Max. He hadn't been sure, but he didn't mind it, either.

Max was already two quarters into Dig Dug.

"If I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes..." Lucas said, as he watched Max approaching her record.

"I got a lot of practice," she told him. "In California, there was an arcade just a few blocks from where we lived, and it was better than staying in the house with Billy and my step dad." She made a face as she spoke their names.

Rather than ask about Billy and her step dad, which sounded like an unhappy subject, he decided to go with California. "Do you miss it?"

She nodded. He couldn't really read the expression on her face.

"What's the ocean like?"

"Pretty awesome," she said, her eyes still fixed on Dig Dug.

"Hawkins seems pretty lame, I bet."

"No, it's not that," she said, still not looking away from the game. Her face fell as she said, "It's just... my dad's still there."

"Why?"

"It's this legal term called divorce. See, when two married people don't love each other anymore-"

"Yeah," Lucas said, a little embarrassed. He'd asked for that one. "What's your dad like?"

"Pretty awesome," she said again. "He's into surfing. And skateboarding. And boats. And making music. But he's not into working from 9 to 5. When they were young, my mom thought that was fun and cool. But after a while, she just wanted somebody with a steady job who never missed making his house payment."

"Why Hawkins?"

"My mom and my step dad wanted a 'fresh start' away from my dad. Like he was the problem." Still playing the game, she hit the buttons a little harder than she needed to as she told the story.

"So your step dad-"

"Is an asshole," Max said. "They're both assholes, him and Billy."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, well, that's life, right?" Max said, slamming the buttons even harder.

Lucas kept his mouth shut, a little concerned about her mood. Maybe she shouldn't have brought up California, either.

"You don't have to be sorry," she said, her voice softening a little. "It's their fault, not yours." She shook her head. "I don't even know why I'm telling you all this. It's not like me whining about it changes anything. We're stuck with whatever our parents do, right?"

"I guess so," Lucas said uneasily.

"So your dad seems nice," Max said, almost all of the anger gone from her voice now.

"Yeah. He was in the navy. That's pretty cool," Lucas said, hoping it was indeed cool. He doubted anything he had to say sounded cool to Max, compared with surfing and stuff.

"What's he do?" She asked.

"He's a lawyer..."

"Oh, so you're rich," Max said, making an exaggerated face.

"No! I mean, I don't think so," Lucas stammered. "It's not like we live in Loch Nora."

"Hey!"

Max tapped the Dig Dug screen, which had suddenly gone blank.

"What happened?" Lucas asked.

"It's dead," she said, smacking the screen harder. It didn't come back on. "I saw so close!"

"Maybe it's just a glitch," Lucas said, leaning around the machine so he could see Keith over at the pizza counter. Lucas waved impatiently to catch his attention. As usual, he took his time walking over.

"So you ditched your friends to hang out with Road Warrior?" Keith asked in his flat, mocking tone.

"What's wrong with Dig Dug?" Lucas asked, ignoring the comment.

Keith squinted at the machine and tapped his finger on the glass. "Looks like it's not working."

"I can see that," Lucas snapped. "Why isn't it working?"

Keith shrugged. "You know I don't fix 'em. I just work here." He reached over to one of the nearby machines, which had an "Out of Order" sign taped over the screen. He pulled the sign off and stuck it over the Dig Dug screen.

The tape didn't stick, and it drifted to the ground like a fallen leaf. Keith sighed, picked it up, and stuck it back on, poking the tape with his fingers to try to make it stick. He smudged more than a little pizza grease on the screen in the process.

"Tough luck, Road Warrior, you're one of the good customers. Wish it hadn't happened to you." Keith turned and ambled back toward the pizza counter.

"One second," Lucas said to Max, then hurried after Keith. "Is that it?" He asked. "You're not even going to try?"

"That's above my pay grade, Dragon Slayer. Like I said, I just work here," Keith told him.

"Hold on, where's the other one?" Lucas demanded. "I know you had another one. That one that was broken two weeks ago. Isn't that one fixed by now?"

"Maybe," Keith said, stopping to turn and face Lucas.

"So let Max use that one," Lucas said. "Where is it?"

"I've got it in the back room," Keith told him, pointing toward it. "You can read the sign. Employees only."

"Come on, just this one time," Lucas asked, willing to beg at this point.

Keith folded his arms. "What are you going to give me in return?"

Lucas clenched his jaw. Keith had him over a barrel, and he was willing to deal. He glanced back over his shoulder to make sure that Max wasn't close enough to hear.

"Keith, if you let us use the other Dig Dug machine in the back room..."

"Yes?" Keith prompted, with a superior tilt of his chin.

"Then I'll call in all my favors. I'll get you that date with Nancy."

"You really have that kind of pull?" Keith asked. "Don't play with me, Sinclair."

"I do," Lucas insisted. "Mike is my best friend. I've lived next door to them since first grade. I talk to Nancy all the time. I'm really close with the whole family."

"You're making me a guarantee?"

Lucas nodded, keeping his face even.

"You've got yourself a deal," Keith said, and turned to walk toward the back room. Lucas ran back to collect Max.

"What was that all about?" She asked.

"There's a second Dig Dug machine. In the back room. The employees only room," Lucas told her, pride swelling in his voice. "I have connections."

"Yeah, Ok," Max said, rolling her eyes, but smiling at the same time. The two of them rejoined Keith just as he was unlocking the back room. A kid passed by them, a slice of pizza in one hand, and stopped in his tracks.

"What do you have back there?" He asked. "More games?"

"Can't you read the sign?" Keith asked him. "Employees only!"

"But you're letting them in!" The kid whined.

"Beat it, Pac Man!" Keith shot back. Lucas hurried to follow Max into the back room before anyone else noticed. They still had an hour of gaming time before his dad came back to pick them up, and he still had quarters in his pocket. He tried not to think about how in the world he was going to get out of his lie to Keith, though.

Author's note: Keith is one of my very favorites. The actor Matty Cardarople is a super nice guy, too. You can find interviews with him on youtube.

12. Chapter 12

Author's note: We're taking one more tiny step toward the Billy that we'll have at the end of this story (who will be pretty different from the Billy we get at the end of Season 2). Also, a quick little update on where El is. She's at her Aunt Becky's, just like in the regular Season 2. After that, it's back to Lumax :) and Lucas' family problems. :(

Billy rolled onto Birch street, leaning back in his seat at the Camero's engine rumbled loudly. It was after dark, so the residents of the clean and quiet little street in Hawkins probably hated the noise, which only made Billy smile.

He checked the address that Vicki had written on a piece of paper and handed to him at school. 340 Birch street. He glanced ahead at the approaching mailbox, which also read "340." With a satisfied nod, he brought the Camero to a stop in front of the mailbox, and tossed the little piece of paper out the open window. He didn't want it to look like he'd actually had to TRY to find the place. That would make Vicki think he actually cared, and that would ruin the whole thing.

He revved his engine to let her know he was there, but also hopefully to annoy her parents. Girls loved dating a guy their parents hated.

Billy saw a woman's shadow pass by an illuminated upstairs window. He leaned even further back in his seat and stared off down the moonlit street, acting like he didn't care. A minute later, the front door opened and Vicki hurried out, speaking hastily over her shoulder to the people inside. Yep, her parents were probably demanding to know who this boy was with the loud car who was picking her up for a date after dark. Billy knew the routine.

"Hey," Vicki said brightly as she rushed to climb into his Camaro.

"Hey," he said without emotion. When he glanced over at her, though, he was wearing his most irresistible bad-boy expression. He saw her blush.

"So where are we going?" She asked.

Billy revved the engine one more time, and then took off down the otherwise quiet street. Vicki laughed nervously as the acceleration pushed her back in her seat. Inside, he smiled to himself. She was hooked.

El froze at the sound of her Aunt Becky's voice. She was talking to someone on the phone. El couldn't hear every word, but she could tell the conversation was about her. So who was her aunt talking to? There weren't very many people who knew about El, or who were supposed to know about El. Hopper, for all his faults, had been right about that much.

Another thought occurred to her. The Bad Men somehow had the ability to listen to other people's phones. What if they were listening to Aunt Becky right now?

El made up her mind. She knew where she needed to go. It was a strange place that she'd never been to, but she knew she'd be able to find it. She had seen the place in her mind's eye, and she had seen that other girl, the one who was like her but different. If she interrupted the phone call and said she was leaving right now to find this mystery girl, Aunt Becky might help her, or she might try to talk her out of it. Or the Bad Men might hear El's words over the phone with their magical listening devices. She didn't like those odds. She would probably be better off on her own.

El turned to walk out the back door, but stopped short when she saw Aunt Becky's purse and wallet lying on the kitchen table. It occurred to her that, unless she wanted to steal a car and figure out how to drive it herself, or to just hope that yet another nice man in a truck offered to give her a ride, she would need money. Hopper had taught her how to count bills and coins, but she had no idea who much money it cost to get to a far away place like the place that she'd seen in her mind's eye, so she took all the money. Maybe if she didn't use it all, she'd bring the rest back to Aunt Becky. If not, well, finding this mystery girl was IMPORTANT. El could sense that much. Mama wanted her to find the girl.

Tearing himself away from his neck and neck battle with Max for top

score at Dig Dug, Lucas checked the clock on the wall.

"My dad's probably outside waiting for us," Lucas told her.

"Fine with me," she said, making an impressive show of entering "MADMAX" into the number one slot. "I'm still the best."

Lucas couldn't even bring himself to argue. The night was going so well and his spirits were too high for that. He only smiled.

They hurried out of the back room, hoping to not be noticed and confronted by any kids jealous of their VIP status. Keith saw them from the pizza counter. He gave Max a sharp and professional nod, which she returned with a confused look on her face. To Lucas, however, Keith gave a slow, solemn nod that made Lucas' stomach tighten up. He had forgotten all about his promise about Nancy. He'd still have to figure that one out, but he pushed it from his mind. It was time to enjoy the remainder of his evening with Max, not worry about other things.

The two of them pushed through the front doors of the Palace Arcade and headed out into the parking lot. A car was indeed waiting for them there, but it wasn't his dad.

"Hey baby," Lucas' mom called to him, rolling down the window.

Lucas winced and tried not to glance sideways at Max. He couldn't help it. He looked. She was silently laughing. He tried to pretend it hadn't happened and walked stiffly to the car.

"Hi mom," Lucas said, sliding into the back seat.

"Did you two have a good time in there?" His mom asked.

"Great," Lucas said without thinking. It had been an honest answer, but he glanced nervously at Max, hoping she didn't think he was a little too excited about it.

"I'm sorry, we haven't met each other yet," his mom said to Max. "I'm Lucas' mom. And this is Erica," she reached over into the passenger seat to put a hand on her daughter's tight braids. "You must be Max. They tell me you're new to Hawkins. Where did you move from?"

"California," Max told her, seeming a little overwhelmed by all the kindness. Lucas didn't mind that part. At least his mom was in a cheery mood again, not like when he'd left the house earlier that evening.

"Oh, California sounds wonderful," his mom responded, putting the car into gear and pulling out of the parking lot. "Did you like it there?"

"It was pretty awesome," Max said.

"I imagine Hawkins seems so small and boring in comparison," his mom said, her voice still cheery and kind. It still made Lucas wince. He'd already said that very thing to Max, and was afraid she really WOULD think Hawkins was lame. He didn't want anyone encouraging her in that direction. More than that, he felt a little ripple of fear when his mom said something bad about Hawkins. He didn't know who would ever want to leave the place. Hawkins was great!

"No, it's Ok," Max answered, which didn't make Lucas feel amazing, but it was better than nothing.

"I'm from Chicago, myself," his mom said, maybe just trying to make conversation with Max. Erica seemed to have gotten bored with all the talk of big places she'd never been to. She turned around in the front seat and look back and forth between Lucas and Max in the back seat.

"One of your friends called while you were gone," Erica said to Lucas.

Without thinking, Lucas replied "Who called?" He immediately realized that he'd fallen for it.

"The nerdy one," Erica answered. "He said you left your elf toys at his house, you should come pick them up."

Lucas felt his face grow hot. He'd been thinking about so many other things that he hadn't remembered to be on guard against Erica's acidic wit.

"They're not toys. They're miniatures," he hissed at her. Then he

glanced over at Max. That probably didn't sound any better.

"Don't call them nerds, Erica," her mom scolded lightly. "That's not very nice."

"I don't know their names!" Erica protested.

"Erica, what did we talk about? If you don't have something nice to say..."

Lucas glanced at Max again. He wished his family would just be cool around her instead of being so... so... extra.

"Hey, how come they weren't at the arcade?" Max asked, breaking into Lucas' embarrassed silence.

"Who?"

"Dustin and the others," Max said.

Lucas wondered why Dustin's name had come to her mind first, but he tried not to dwell on it. "Oh, they were there earlier, but I guess they decided to finish some homework before bed. School night, you know." He searched for something else to say to keep Max from asking more about his friends. He already felt guilty for ditching them to go get her, he didn't want to make it worse.

"Speaking of friends, did you have a party in California?" he tried.

"A party?" Max asked with a little mocking smile.

"I mean, you know, your own group?" Lucas said, kicking himself. He knew very well that no one but his friends called themselves a party.

"Oh, sure," Max said. "I had a few friends back there. Andy. Kori. Cam. Skyler..."

Lucas honestly had no idea if those were boy's names or girl's, and it made him uneasy. California must be a strange place, he thought.

Max continued listing names. "Ash. Jacob..."

"They sound pretty cool," Lucas said uneasily.

"Oh yeah. Especially Jacob. Super cool," she said.

He turned to stare out the window. Great.

The car bounced over a pothole and pulled up to Lucas' house. He was just wondering why his mom hadn't gone straight to Max's house when she offered up an answer.

"It's almost Erica's bedtime," his mom said, putting the car into park but leaving the key turned on. "Get your pajamas and brush your teeth. I'll be back from dropping Max off before you're asleep."

Erica bounced out of the car, and her mom followed her toward the house, leaving Max and Lucas in the car. Erica opened the front door and skipped inside. Their mom paused at the door, apparently talking to their dad.

"Nice house," Max teased Lucas in the quiet car. "I mean, it's not the mansion I expected, but it's still three times as big as mine."

"We're not rich," Lucas protested. In reality, he didn't know how much money his dad made. Now that he thought about it, even if his dad had told him what his yearly salary was, Lucas wouldn't have anything to compare it with. His only understanding of money was that the arcade cost twenty five cents, he could earn five dollars for mowing a lawn, and to buy Asteroids for his Atari would set him back at least thirty dollars. Beyond that, the idea of ten thousand or a hundred thousand dollars was something he didn't think about.

Lucas' mom's voice rose outside. He couldn't really make out the words through the closed car door and over the quiet hum of the still running engine, and he hoped Max couldn't either. He looked away, ashamed that she'd happened to see one of his parent's fights. He wanted to sink into the seat cushions and disappear. He continued to stare at his own hands for a long and uncomfortable moment before Max broke the silence.

"Are you Ok over there?"

"Sorry you had to see this," he mumbled, not looking at her.

"Hey, it's no big deal," she said. "So your parents fight. My family does it all the time."

Lucas eased up a little. But only a little. "They never used to," he said, staring sadly at his mom's back as she still stood in the door way, gesturing angrily as she talked with his dad.

"Something change?" Max asked.

"I don't know," Lucas admitted.

"Well I've been hearing it since I was six," she told him. "You get used to it after a while."

That part didn't make Lucas feel any better. He didn't want to get used to it. He wanted it to be over. His mom turned and started back toward the car, so he held back anything he'd been about to say.

Just before she got back in the car, though, Max surprised him again. "Sorry you have to deal with it, though," she said. And then his mom was back in the car and they were rolling down the street, headed for Max's house. The car ride was silent, but Lucas felt a tiny bit better.

13. Chapter 13

Author's note: We start off with Hopper. Remember that, so far in our story, Will hasn't been taken by the shadow monster, and so Hopper hasn't started digging holes into the Upside Down. That leaves him free to chase after El when she runs away to her Aunt Becky. Then we touch bases with Nancy and Jonathan, who are in the same place they would be during Season 2. Their story hasn't changed yet, but it will. Then it's back to Max, Lucas, and Dustin.

Hopper drummed his fingers on the steering wheel in agitation as he shot down Larrabee road at well over the speed limit. He hadn't come across any cops, but even though he was well outside of Hawkins and his own legal jurisdiction, he was pretty sure he could get any local cops to let him go without trouble.

His tires slid just a little as he rounded a curve and the Ives house came into sight. The last and only time he'd come this way, Joyce had been with him. They'd been deep in their search for Will, and so nothing else had really mattered to them at the time. El hadn't mattered to him at the time. She damn sure mattered now. He didn't know where she was, or what she was doing, but he knew it wasn't safe to let her run around on her own. The world was full of dangers that she didn't know about, not to mention the shadowy government agency that wanted to bring her back in a cage and keep her for their twisted experiments.

He slid to a stop in the Ives' gravel driveway and jumped out of his truck. The talkative Ives sister, Becky, was already at the door to meet him. He took that for good news.

"Is she here?" Hopper asked before he'd even reached her front porch. He decided to throw caution to the wind. If The Lab had bugged the Ives house, then they already knew about El. If so, then speed was more important than secrecy right now. If El was there, he needed to get her to a hiding place as fast as he could.

Becky shook her head.

Hopper's heart fell.

"But she was?" As he approached El's aunt, he noted that her eyes looked red and watery. Her fingers trembled slightly as she took a drag on a cigarette.

"She showed up yesterday," Becky told him, her voice weak.

"Where did she go?" Hopper asked quickly. He could find time to feel sorry for Becky later. Right now, he needed to find El, fast.

"You knew about her all along?" Becky asked, her voice still weak and trembling.

"What?"

"Did you know Jane was real... was alive? Even when you came here to ask Terry about it? Were you lying to me?"

"No," Hopper said impatiently. He didn't know how much he could or should share with Becky. He didn't know how much he could trust her to keep quiet. For that matter, it might be better for her own safety if she didn't know the real story. The Lab had made people disappear before.

"No," he repeated. "I didn't know anything about El back then. But I need to find her now."

"El?"

"Jane. She goes by... her name's El," Hopper said, angry that he needed to explain himself when there were more important things at hand. "Listen to me, she's in danger. I need you to tell me where she went!"

An ugly red van sat in the parking lot of one of the ugliest buildings that Nancy had ever seen.

"Positive this is the right place?" Jonathan asked as he pulled the car to a stop.

"3833, yeah," Nancy confirmed, reading off of the business card she'd gotten from Barb's parents.

"Alright," Jonathan agreed, looking about as enthused with this run-down place as she was. They got out of the car and hesitantly made their way up to what they assumed was the front door to Murray Bauman's house. It looked more like a prison, or a bomb shelter.

Jonathan pressed the doorbell, which buzzed sharply.

"Look at the camera," came a voice through a speaker.

Jonathan quickly examined the box that had just spoken to him, evidently not finding any camera there.

"The camera!" The voice came again, sounding more annoyed. "Not the loudspeaker. Above you, to the right."

As Nancy and Jonathan turned to look for the alleged hidden camera, the creaky metal door sudden burst open to reveal a disheveled man in a stained white shirt and a grungy red bath robe.

"Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers, you two are a long way from home."

Dustin pedaled hard to make it to the bike rack on time. He'd been up all night with Dart, marveling over his rapidly changing anatomy, so he'd had trouble waking up in time for school. The party was waiting there for him. It was their policy to always walk into school together. Originally that had been an anti-bullying precaution, and then the habit had stuck. It wasn't often that a party member was late, but they always waited these days. The last time that they'd gotten lax and not been alarmed when a party member was late had been that terrible day last year when Will mysteriously hadn't shown up for school.

Today, Will and Mike were leaning against one end of the bike rack talking to each other, while Max and Lucas were at the other end, also carrying on their own conversation, and standing just a little closer to each other than Dustin remembered seeing before. His

suspicions were immediately raised.

Will saw Dustin approaching first. "Is everything Ok?" he asked.

Dustin dismounted and slotted his bike into the rack. "Woke up late," Dustin told him. "I was up all night with..." He leaned a little closer to lower his voice. "d. a. r. t." He pulled his backpack off one shoulder and reached for the zipper, but the sound of the school bell made him stop.

"I'll show you guys in the AV room," Dustin said, closing the zipper. "You guys are gonna freak when you see him."

The five of them hurried through the doors and down the hall toward their first class. Dustin figured that the noisy bustle of the other kids in the hallway would be loud enough that they wouldn't overhear anything he said. He ran the extra few steps to catch up with Max, and still had to call her name three times to get her attention from the conversation she was having with Lucas.

"You never came over to see him last night," Dustin said.

"Yeah, sorry," Max told him. "Billy wouldn't drive me, and my parents weren't home."

"He grew!" Dustin said, unable to contain himself. "Just wait till you see him. He even has back legs now!"

"What?" Max said in surprise. "That's way too fast, that can't be normal."

"I know, isn't it awesome?" Dustin beamed. "He's incredible. This is going to change science as we know it."

"You brought him?" Max asked. Dustin patted his backpack.

"AV room at lunch, I'll show everybody. Who knows how big he'll be by then. I think I can feel him getting heavier right now."

Max looked skeptical. She wore that look a lot around Dustin. But she was now walking side by side with him, asking about Dart. Lucas was somewhere a few steps behind.

The first half of the day dragged on for Dustin. He was normally a great student, but today he did nothing but count down the minutes until the lunch bell rank, when they could finally get away into the solace of the AV room, and when Dustin could finally show everybody. Since it was the second day this week that they would be skipping lunch to spend time with Dart, Will had helpfully volunteered to go to the cafeteria and bring them back some food that they could scarf down quickly. Good ol' Will, always thinking of others.

When the bell finally rang, Dustin eagerly lead the other three of them down the hall to the AV room. Max, Lucas, and Mike filed in after him. Once the door was locked, Dustin laid his backpack gently on the table and unzipped it. Dart squirmed and gurgled a little inside. He'd done that a few times today, making Dustin nervous that one of the other students or teachers would hear him, or see his backpack moving on its own, but so far, nobody had noticed.

Dart was now too big for his Ghostbuster trap, so Dustin had taken the largest shoebox he could find, and coated it in five layers of duct tape. Three individual strips of tape held the lid in place, which Dustin now peeled back and opened the box, letting everyone see.

Max leaned in close, almost bumping heads with Dustin as she took in his new features. Dustin even noticed changes since he'd packed Dart away in the box this morning. In addition to the hind legs, his body had elongated, taking on more of a definite shape than his original tadpole blob of a body. His neck had started to stretch out, too, giving him a head that was distinct from the body.

"Whoa," Max said as she studied him.

"I know. It's tubular, right?" Dustin replied. "And look at the yellow patches of color that he's starting to get on his butt."

"Look at how he moves," Max added. "He's not so clumsy like an infant anymore. He's maturing so fast. Not like any frog or lizard I've ever seen."

"All that growing requires a lot of food," Dustin told her. "He's been eating like a cow. You wouldn't believe how much I fed him last

night." Dustin leaned away from the box just a little so he could look to Mike and Lucas. "Isn't he awesome, guys?"

Lucas hung back by the door, scowling over at the box on the table. Dustin couldn't understand why Lucas wasn't impressed. A new species was always cool, let alone a new species that might change the biology textbooks forever.

Mike leaned in closer, his eyebrows coming together in concentration. It was pretty dark in the room, so Mike pulled the lamp a little closer.

"Not too close," Dustin said, as Dart squirmed under the unwanted light.

"Sorry, I'm just trying to get a better look," Mike said. "I don't know, it just doesn't seem natural, the way he's growing so fast."

"Earth shattering discoveries always seem impossible," Dustin said proudly. "How do you think they felt when they dug up the first dinosaur skeleton? Or when they saw the first giant squid?"

"I don't know," Mike repeated grimly. It bugged Dustin a little that Mike was judging Dart so harshly. As if the little guy had done something wrong.

"I think you should show him to Mr. Clarke," Mike said.

"Not yet," Dustin protested. "After I publish my findings. This is my discovery."

"Maybe he can tell us what's wrong with Dart," Mike insisted.

"There's NOTHING wrong with Dart," Dustin argued.

He gave out a loud gurgling sound, as if he knew the humans were talking about him.

"He sounds different, too," Max commented. "He used to kind of chirp."

A knock on the door interrupted them. It was the first four bars of the

Ghostbusters theme. Will's secret knock. Lucas, closest to the door because of his lack of interest in Dart, hurried to unlock it for Will. He came inside, carrying a tray from the cafeteria.

Dart jumped inside his box and let out an even louder sound, half gurgle, half growl.

Will startled and dropped the tray of food.

Mike rushed over to help him pick up the food while Lucas pulled him inside, glanced out into the hall to make sure no one had noticed, and closed the door.

"It's Ok," Dustin said to Dart in a calming tone. "It's just Will. Nothing to be scared of." Dart squirmed inside the box, now gurgling quietly. "Sorry about that, Will," Dustin said. "Dart isn't used to this many people. He's just nervous, that's all."

Mike scowled at him from the ground where he was picking up the last of the spilled food with Will. It was mostly apples, bags of chips, and juice boxes, and nothing had broken open, so it wasn't much of a mess. "You should still tell Mr. Clarke," Mike said. "You don't even know how big Dart's going to get. How long can you keep hiding him in your room?"

"I'll tell him," Dustin argued. "As soon as I've published my discovery. This is a once in a lifetime chance. I can't waste it."

Max unzipped her backpack and took a few baby carrots out of her lunch box. She dropped them in the box, and Dart scarfed them down noisily. "We'll need to get him a lot more food right after school," she told Dustin. "At the rate he's growing, he must be starving."

The unavoidable school bell rang, and Dustin hurried to close Dart back up in his box. "Don't worry little guy. You'll be home soon," he told him.

14. Chapter 14

Author's note: This is about the last scene where things will remain the same as they are in the show. From here on out, things change pretty fast. The story is only just starting to roll out. You could say that everything so far has just been a slow lead up to the big changes that are about to happen. Hawkins will never be the same.

Will had carried around a leaden weight in his stomach for the entire second half of the school day, ever since Dart had roared at him. Instead of being able to concentrate on his classes, nothing but memories of his terrible ordeal last year had been swimming through his mind. Cold darkness, with poisonous air and creeping vines. A monster with a face that opened up, with his terrifying guttural snarls. But one memory plagued his worst of all. The memory was as clear as if it were yesterday. Will stood in front of a bathroom mirror, his heart pounding, and his stomach churning. He felt something coming, something that he dreaded, and he tried to force it down, but he couldn't. He pitched over the sink and coughed out a disgusting mouthful of mucus and bile. In the middle of that viscus wad, a slippery, slimy slug, no bigger than his finger, crawled down the sink drain. Feeling afraid and somehow ashamed, Will turned on the faucet and washed it down, hoping to never see or think of the wretched thing again.

Back in the hallway at Hawkins Middle, Will's knees went weak with the memory. He leaned against the cold metal of his locker, trying to breathe evenly. Maybe Dart wasn't the same slug he'd spit into the sink. Maybe they weren't even related. But, whatever he decided in his brain, something in his heart told him that he was somehow responsible, that he'd brought something evil back into this world with him, that the world might have been better off if he'd never returned from that place, that there was something wrong with HIM.

"Will, are you coming?" Mike asked, closing his own locker and shouldering his backpack. Will took a deep breath, struggling with all the doubts and fears. He had to tell someone. Hiding it for a year had been bad enough. It wasn't right, and he had to tell someone.

Mike would understand, he hoped. Mike already knew the truth about Will's episodes. He was the only one who Will had told the truth.

"What is it?" Mike asked, correctly reading the look on Will's face.

"Hold on, Dustin," Mike called, hurrying to catch up. Dustin, Lucas, and Max were almost through the front doors on their way to the bike rack. He couldn't afford to let Dart out of his sight. Not after what he'd just heard.

The three of them turned and waited for Mike to catch up. They were understandably surprised to see the serious look on his face.

"Emergency meeting in the AV room," Mike said, unwilling to spill any of the details out here in the open where just anyone could hear.

"What happened?" Lucas asked.

"I'll tell you inside," Mike said.

"Is this about Dart?" Dustin asked, starting to look defensive.

"Emergency meeting," Mike reiterated. He wasn't going to budge. This whole thing could be a lot more serious than any of them realized.

After a second's hesitation, the three of them moved to follow him back down the hall to the AV room.

"Party members only," Mike said, looking squarely at Max. Maybe they could trust her, maybe not. But when it came to Will and his time in the Upside Down, they hadn't told their parents, anyone at school, not even the great Mr. Clarke. As far as Mike was concerned, that was a secret nobody needed to learn about.

Max looked taken aback by Mike's directness. He'd been cold to her before, but this was different. He held her gaze without blinking. He wasn't going to budge.

"Come on Mike," Dustin said, waving a pleading hand toward Max.

"No. This is non negotiable." He turned and marched off, expecting them to be behind him.

Reluctantly, Dustin and Lucas mumbled apologies to Max and followed.

A minute later, Mike guided a nervous Will into the AV room. Dustin and Lucas filed in after them, and he closed the door.

"What's so important?" Lucas demanded

"That's wasn't very cool, Mike," Dustin scolded him.

"Just listen and you'll understand. This is important. It could be life or death," Mike said seriously. That got their attention. He glanced at Will, who still looked nervous, and nodded reassuringly. He had promised not to spill all of Will's secrets. Only what it took to convince the rest of the party about Dart's real nature. Up until now, they'd been treating the gross little thing as some kind of stray puppy. That had to change.

"When Will was in the Upside Down, he saw something that looked like Dart," Mike began, stretching the truth only a little.

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Dustin asked.

"I wasn't sure," Will mumbled, trying to stay out of it.

"But then on Halloween night, he heard the exact same sound that Dart makes," Mike continued. Dustin's backpack wobbled, and a little guttural chirp emanated from within. Mike glared at the backpack.

"Coincidence," Dustin argued.

"Or not," Mike said, taking his eyes away from the backpack. "What if, when Will was in the Upside Down, he somehow acquired True Sight?" He looked into their faces one at a time. "What if these episodes that Will keeps having aren't really flashbacks at all. Maybe they're real. Maybe Will can somehow see into the Upside Down." Mike braced himself. He knew Dustin wasn't going to like hearing this. "Maybe Dart is from the Upside Down."

"We have to take him to Hopper," Lucas said suddenly.

"I agree." Mike was glad someone was starting to see reason.

"No. No way," Dustin said without hesitation. "If we take him to Hopper, Dart's as good as dead."

"Maybe he should be dead."

"How can you say that?"

"How can you not? He's from the Upside Down!"

"Maybe!" Dustin argued. "But even if he is, that doesn't automatically mean that he's bad." There was a loud knock on the door, followed by Max's muffled voice, but the boys were too engaged in their argument to pay her any attention.

"That's like saying just because someone's from the Death Star doesn't make them bad," Mike said, unable to understand Dustin's problem.

"We have a bond," Dustin said, his face and voice falling.

"A bond?!" Mike couldn't believe his ears. "Just because he likes nougat?!"

"No, because he trusts me!" Dustin said.

"He trusts you?" Lucas asked incredulously.

"Yes, I promised that I would take care of him."

Dart snarled from inside the backpack. It wasn't the cute chirping sound he'd made when he was little. It wasn't even the weird gurgle he'd been doing all day. This sounded angry and predatory. The four of them stared at the backpack sitting in the middle of the table. It snarled again and began to shake.

"Open it," Mike told Dustin.

The bag shook and snarled again. If it kept going, the backpack was going to roll right off the table.

Mike grabbed the nearest thing he could find and raised it over his head like a weapon.

"Don't hurt him!" Dustin begged.

"Only if he attacks," Mike said, his heart pounding. The bag shook violently.

"Just open it already," Lucas insisted.

Dustin didn't move for a long moment. He just continued to stare helplessly at the shaking bag. Slowly, cautiously, he reached out, gingerly grabbed the zipped, and pulled.

He jumped back as Dart came spilling out. The thing had gotten itself out of the duct taped shoe box and had been crawling free inside the bag. Mike couldn't believe how much he'd changed in the last few hours. His legs were even longer. His body was more defined, with little muscles instead of a gooey blob of flesh. He gave a tiny roar to the crowded room, and Mike could see a row of tiny white teeth that hadn't been there before.

Something in Mike's mind snapped. He stopped gawking and stepped forward, swinging his improvised weapon.

"No!" Dustin lunged in his path, pushing his hands out of the way. Mike's swing missed Dart by a mile, and the nasty little thing leaped off the table.

The four kids stumbled over each other as some of them tried to get out of Dart's way, and some of them tried to chase after him.

His green belly hit the tile floor with a wet plop, and he half hopped, half swam away. Mike felt panic rising in his chest, but at least Dart couldn't get far. The room wasn't that big, and the four of them would be able to trap him.

Suddenly the door swung open. He saw Max, a bent paper clip in one hand, and a look of disbelief on her face as she tried to take in the bizarre scene in the AV room.

Dart must have smelled freedom, and he bolted. His four little legs

pumping for all they were worth, he shot past Max, through the door, and out of sight.

The four of them gave chase and all tried to pile through the door at the same time. Dustin collided with Max, crashing to the ground. By the time Mike made it past the tangle of people and out into the hallway, Dart had vanished.

"What WAS that?" Max asked, getting to her feet.

"Dart!" Mike answered.

"What?"

"You let him escape," he yelled, taking out his frustration on her. But he wasn't the only angry one.

"Why did you attack him?" Dustin demanded, thrusting a finger at his chest.

"Come on," Mike said, pushing the hand aside. They had no time to waste, and they would need to work together to find and corral Dart now that he was free.

"Don't hurt him!" Dustin yelled, his voice cracking. "Don't you hurt him!"

Author's note: Since that chapter didn't introduce too much new material, I'll post a second one today.

15. Chapter 15

Author's note: So remember that in our timeline, El came to the school to see mike YESTERDAY. In the TV show, El happened to come to the school on the same day that Dart got loose, and that's when she and Mike almost saw each other, and when El pulled Max's skateboard. In our story, that doesn't happen because El was here yesterday, and now she's already gone off in search of Mama. Mike and the go looking for the runaway Dart. Instead of the scene between Mike and Max on her skateboard in the gym ("I could be your zoomer"), we get this:

Max quietly opened the door to the school kitchen. She winced as it squeaked a little, but it wasn't loud enough to alert anybody who might be nearby. The school was emptying out fast, but there were still a few people around, and students weren't supposed to be in the kitchens. Dart didn't know that, though, so he might have gone in there looking for food. Max crouched down and looked under the stove. He wasn't there. She looked under the sink. Nothing. Under the fridge. Still nothing.

"Here Dart," she tried, quietly. She clicked her tongue quickly, calling to him. Sometimes that worked with cats. "God, I sound like Dustin," she said, rolling her eyes at herself. She pulled aside a lunch cart, but Dart wasn't underneath.

Bang! Dustin slammed the kitchen door open.

"Anything?" He asked desperately.

"Shhh," she said. "If he was here, you'd have scared him off."

"Sorry," Dustin said quickly, lowering his voice to an impractical whisper. "Did you find anything?"

"He's not here," she said, shaking her head.

Dustin lifted his supercom to his mouth and said "Kitchens are clear. Moving North"

Max stared at him. "You guys are such nerds."

Before Dustin could reply to her, the supercom squawked with a short burst of static, and then Mike's distorted voice came in. "East is clear."

She rolled her eyes again, and pushed past Dustin out of the kitchen and back into the hallway.

"If you find him," Dustin asked, a small quiver in his voice, "You won't..."

"No, of course not," Max said, giving him a sharp look as he moved to catch up. "I wouldn't hurt him. Why does Mike want to catch him so bad now, anyway? He wasn't interested in Dart at all before."

When Dustin stumbled over his words a few times, trying to answer her simple question, she stopped a fixed him with an inquisitioner's stare.

"Because... he... thinks Dart might be poisonous," Dustin said. "That's right... he was talking to Mr. Clarke right before we left, and Mr. Clarke reminded him that some species of South American frogs are poisonous. Mike got really concerned... for our safety."

Max didn't buy a word of it. "Dart's not a frog," she scoffed.

"Yeah... I know that, of course," Dustin stammered. "But Mike, you know, he's not like us."

Max stared him down for a moment longer, not ready to believe anything he said. Why would Dustin lie to her about Mike? Maybe because Mike was being a little asshole and Dustin was just trying to protect his friend. She'd noticed how tight the four of them were. They didn't seem to trust outsiders at all. If they thought she was an outsider...

"Whatever," she said angrily, shrugging her shoulders and letting Dustin free of her stare.

"Hey, don't worry about Mike," Dustin said quickly, rushing after her. "He's not always like this."

"Only when I'm around?" Max challenged him.

"No, that's crazy," Dustin said, his voice cracking nervously. "Mike's just... going through a hard time right now."

"Right," Max said, looking for Dart inside an empty classroom as Dustin trailed behind her.

"He's the best kind of friend you could have," he told her. "He'll warm up to you, I promise. It's just that he..." Dustin floundered around. "He had some girl troubles."

Max shot him a skeptical look.

"Yeah, he went through a bad break up. He's still not over it."

"Mike with a girl?" Max scoffed.

"So you can see why he took it so hard when it ended," Dustin explained. "If you just give him some time, he'll come around."

The two of them froze.

Their eyes met. They had both heard it. The familiar gurgling sound.

Their path through the empty school had brought them to the gymnasium. They looked at the big double doors, and heard the sound again.

They pushed through the doors and into the gym. Max stopped in her tracks. The Janitor, The scary Janitor, was pushing a cart of supplies out the door in the far corner of the gym. She and Dustin backed out the way they'd come and crouched down.

"We'll have to do this quietly," Dustin whispered. "You take the left side, I'll take the right. Signal if you find Dart."

"How am I supposed to signal if we're keeping quiet?" Max hissed.

"Do you know how to make a bird call?" Dustin asked. "Wait, stupid idea. There aren't any birds in here. How about a cricket? Can you make a cricket sound?"

Max ran out of patience and pushed past him into the gym, checking to see that The Janitor had left first.

"It's like this, Max" Dustin called after her, still somehow trying and failing to whisper. "Chirrrrrp chirrrrp chirrrp. That's the signal, Ok?"

She left him there and began to skirt the left perimeter of the gym. The lights were off, and she heard no sound other than Dustin's feet shuffling faintly way over on the other side of the vast room. It felt very eerie. She began to worry about The Janitor, with his crazy eyes, bursting back in, angry that students were poking around here when they were supposed to be on the way home. What if he had a Vietnam flashback and thought she was an enemy? In the spooky darkness, she even started to worry about Dart jumping out and spitting poison, like a cobra. That was stupid. She'd clearly been spending too much time around Dustin if her imagination could run wild like that.

She'd reached the back wall, and the door to the locker rooms, with no sign of Dart so far. She was about to go in without a second thought, when she heard a quiet rustling sound from inside. She held very still, listening. She heard it again.

"Dart?" She whispered. Nothing.

She looked around the dark gym for Dustin, but she didn't see him. She was suddenly aware that she could no longer hear him walking around, either. Was that him rustling inside the locker room?

"Dustin?" She whispered, a little louder. No reply. But that rustling sound came from inside the locker rooms again. Maybe that's where The Janitor had gone. With one last look around the dark, empty gym, she took a deep breath and slipped inside the locker rooms.

It was even darker in there, since there were no windows. She tried to tip toe, but the tile floor was loudly unforgiving. Two steps in, she heard the sound again. Not a voice, but definitely something moving.

"Dart?" She tried again.

There was the sound again.

Two more steps.

Something moved in the corner. She couldn't quite make it out in the darkness. She drew closer. Two more steps.

"Max!"

Dustin exploded in through the doorway behind her, almost giving her a heart attack.

"You found him!"

She wanted to hit him, but Dustin was already crawling on his knees toward the dark corner of the room.

"It's Ok little guy, I'm here," he said. "You don't have to be scared."

The dark shadow in the corner shuffled around again, and gurgled unhappily. Dustin scrambled forward and scooped him up, cooing to Dart as if he were a kitten.

"I've got you buddy. You're safe now," Dustin said. He sudden sobered and turned to face Max. "You have to help me get him out of here. If Mike finds him, he'll take him to Hopper."

"Who?" Max asked.

"Hopper. He's the police," Dustin said. He must forgotten she was new. He seemed to be considering what to tell her. "Hopper's tough... no nonsense. If he thinks Dart is dangerous, he'll probably take him outside and smash his head with a rock."

"Why does everyone suddenly think Dart is dangerous?" Max asked, throwing her hands up in the air. These people were weird. She wondered if that was a Hawkins thing, or a nerd thing. "A few hours ago none of them cared about Dart. Now they want to kill him?"

"It's complicated," Dustin said, clearly upset. "Can you just help me get him out of here before the others find him?" Dart burbled and squirmed in Dustin's hands.

"Fine, but he goes home with me," Max said.

"What?!" Dustin asked, his eyes going wide.

"Mike's your friend. He comes over to your house sometimes, right?" Max explained. "So it's not safe to hide Dart there. He's just going to keep getting bigger. Sooner or later he'll get found out." Dustin looked unhappy, but Max continued. "Mike obviously don't want to be my friend, so there's no chance he'll find Dart at my house."

"But... But..." Dustin said in a pained voice.

She heard the sound of an opening door, and distant echoing footsteps. Dustin's eyes went even wider.

"They're coming. Max, we have to get him out of here," Dustin begged.

She heard three voices out in the gym, slowly moving closer.

"You think he crawled all the way here?" That sounded like Lucas.

"Where are the lights?" That could have been Will.

"Where are you, you little bastard?" That was Mike, for sure.

Dustin looked like he was about to panic. "Hurry, Max, close me in one of these lockers." He fumbled around with his hands, trying to hold the recently bloated Dart with both hands and open one of the lockers at the same time. "Close me in, and if anyone asks, you haven't seen me." He had stuffed one leg and his head inside the tiny locker when Max lost all patience with him.

She stomped across the small locker room to Dustin and snatched Dart out of his hands.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Dustin asked.

"Did you hear that?" One of the three voices echoed from the gym. "I think it came from there. The locker room."

Max was out of time. She grabbed the hat right off Dustin's head, stuffed Dart inside, and jammed it on her own head.

Dart had gotten a lot fatter in the last day, so the hat barely fit. She tried to pull it down as far as it would go, and hoped it didn't look like the hat was floating above her hair. For once in his short life, Dart was either paralyzed with fear, or he knew that trying to crawl away now would get him killed. Miraculously, he lay still. Max turned around and put on an innocent face just in time.

The other three came pouring into the small locker room, radios in their hands and tense looks on their faces, like a police search party. Mike flicked on the lights.

"Did you find him?" Mike asked.

Max blinked in the bright light. "Nope."

Dustin tripped as he pulled half of himself back out of the locker. The locker door clanged extra loud in the hard-tiled room.

"What were you doing in here?" Lucas asked, a bewildered expression on his face. "And why are you wearing-"

"We'd just check everywhere else, so we thought why not check the locker room," Max said quickly.

"But this is the BOYS locker room," Mike snapped.

"So?" She shot back, glaring at him.

"Forget it, we need to keep looking," Mike said, turning his back on her. "Where haven't we looked yet?" He asked Lucas and Will.

"The library?" Will suggested.

The three of them moved on, evidently assuming that Max and Dustin were following behind. The two of them waited until the departing voices were too quiet to make out.

"I owe you one," Dustin told Max. "Great poker face, by the way."

"What is WRONG with him?" Max said, rounding on Dustin.

"Who?"

"Mike!"

"It's complicated," Dustin insisted. Max shook her head and walked out of the locker room. A second later, Dustin bounded after her. He had to work to keep up as she stalked across the gym, which was empty again.

"Hold on," he said as soon as he'd caught up. "I need to take Dart back home."

"Why should he go back with you?" Max asked.

"Because he trusts me. We have a bond."

"How do I know you won't just give him up to your friends so they can get rid of him?" Max asked angrily.

"I'd never betray Dart," Dustin said.

"I don't know, you take Mike's side with everything else," she shot at him.

"That's not fair," Dustin argued. "It's complicated with Mike. There are things."

"Things?"

"Yeah, things," Dustin said, looking as unhappy as she'd ever seen him. "I wish I could talk about it, but-"

"Fine," she said, taking off his hat and thrusting it and Dart into his chest. "But you'd better not let Dart out of your sight. He's getting bigger. Next time we probably won't be able to catch him. And I'm coming over tomorrow to make sure you've got a good place for him. That litter terrarium isn't good enough anymore. He's too big." She stalked off, leaving Dustin alone in the gym.

Author's note: I don't like writing angry Mike! :) Please remember that he's not just being a jerk. He's HURTING because his magical girlfriend died and now he knows that he'll never find true love again and the best thing in his life is gone forever! That's how I would feel if I was Mike, anyway.